

Chains of the Kindred

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Category: Halo, Warhammer

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2007-07-25 00:35:51

Updated: 2015-02-01 00:17:39

Packaged: 2016-04-27 03:16:33

Rating: T

Chapters: 22

Words: 144,625

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: A HaloWarhammer 40K crossover. Two besieged branches of Humanity, separated by time and space have been reunited. And there is only War!

1. Chapter 1

Medusa System, Ultima Segmentum

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Captain Adiso Paulos had never seen a man so fatigued as General Sturnn. The Imperial Guard general seemed to be fighting the urge to rest, less he dishonor the Imperial Guardsmen and Space Marines still waging bloody war on the dying world of Medusa V. The war on Medusa V had been a short, brutal and rather bizarre conflict. Imperial forces had come to Medusa V in order to evacuate its loyal citizens and prevent the forces of Chaos from transforming the planet into a Daemon world. The warriors of humanity, however, soon found themselves in the middle of a free-for-all against every major power in the Milky Way galaxy. Somehow, either through the providence of the Emperor, the Imperium had managed to break the backs of the Xenos and heretics and succeed in their objectives. The price was incredibly high. General Sturnn's Cadian 412th Shock Troop Regiment had taken nearly 45 percent casualties. And the regiment had been fighting alongside a full company of Space Marines. There had been whispers of entire regiments being completely destroyed. Worse, there were not enough transports or time to evacuate all the Imperial forces before Van Grothe's Rapidity consumed Medusa V. Captain Paulos had prayed for the Emperor's forgiveness almost constantly for that sin.

Captain Paulos raised his voice and called out to the Imperial Guard officer. "General Sturnn, we will be executing our Warp Jump momentarily."

General Sturnn moved closer to the command chair where the Captain was seated. "My troopers are aboard I assume?"

Captain Paulos looked up to General Sturnn, in the literal and figurative sense. Sturnn was one of the few Imperial Guard commanders who did not spend his men's lives like currency. He was also as physically imposing as any non-Astartes human Adiso had ever seen. Sturnn's height advantage over Paulos was amplified by the fact that the captain was wired into the command chair.

"They are all aboard and I have ordered my medical staff to render any and all aid to your men."

General Sturnn smiled weakly. "You have my gratitude. If you will excuse me Captain, I must attend to my regiment."

"Of course, General." Captain Paulos bowed his head politely and Sturnn returned the gesture and left.

A junior officer informed Captain Paulos that the Gellar Fields were operating at peak efficiency. Captain Paulos thanked the Machine Spirits of the Palma and recited a quick prayer to the Emperor.

"Status on our escorts and the Spartan Ward?"

The ship's astropath contacted the captain from his secure position within the ship. "All ships are ready to enter the Immaterium on your orders, captain."

"Commence Warp Jump."

The space surrounding Medusa V was burning with the energies of the Warp, and the holes in reality opened by the flotilla of Imperial ships were like a candle next to a funeral pyre. In an instant the vessels vanished, and in that instant, everything changed.

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

Sergeant Avery Johnson smiled as looked at the blue hunk of rock filling the viewports of Cairo Station.

"Earth. Haven't seen her in years. You know, when I shipped out for basic, the orbital defense grid was all theory and politics. Now look at it. The Cairo is just one of 300 geo-synch platforms."

He then turned and shook his head at his silent comrade and friend, Spartan-117. Spartan-117, Master Chief, as he was known was one of the last surviving Spartan-IIs. He was an intimidating sight at nearly 7 feet tall and clad in MJOLNIR armor. This intimidation didn't even register to the soldiers of the UNSC. Instead, the Chief was a shining symbol of hope that maybe; just maybe, humanity had a shot in the War. The Chief's turned his gaze towards the vast number of human ships orbiting Earth.

Johnson crossed his arms. "They've been arriving all morning. Something huge is about to happen, Chief."

The tram they had been riding came to a stop. Outside, dozens of cheering marines and several hovercams were awaiting Sgt. Johnson and Master Chief's arrival.

Master Chief looked directly at Johnson. "I thought you said there weren't going to be any cameras."

Johnson snorted. "And you said you were gonna wear something nice. People need heroes Chief. So smile, while there's still something to smile about!"

The bridge of Cairo station was a hive of activity. Though this was an award ceremony for Johnson, Master Chief and the late Captain Keyes there were other matters at hand.

Lord Hood looked as if he were appraising the two arrivals. "Gentlemen, glad to have you back. I'm sorry but we'll have to keep this short."

An aide whispered something to Lord Hood and the commander of naval operations nodded. "Go ahead Cortana."

The AI known as Cortana materialized on the holoprojector. "Sir, we're detecting severe spatial distortions near Io. Probes are in route."

Lord Hood turned to his aide and began to speak in hushed tones. Cortana turned towards the Chief and Johnson and smiled.

"You look nice."

"Thanks." The two soldiers replied in unison. Chief and Johnson flashed a glance at each other, if it was annoyance or in good humor Cortana couldn't tell.

"Sgt. Major. The Colonial Cross is awarded for singular acts of courage and daringâ€|"

Lord Hood was interrupted by dozens of alarm klaxons. The room erupted into activity as the space above Luna's 'northern' pole appeared as if it was burning. The Master Chief and assorted UNSC personnel were overwhelmed by the most horrific of smells. The holoprojector, where moments before Cortana had been 'standing' had become a bubbling fountain of human blood. A pair of towers of assorted bones grew from the center of the room and a waterfall of blood flowed between them. Several UNSC personnel panicked and attempted to flee. Then the horror came. A creature as tall as Master Chief emerged from the abomination in the center of the bridge. It was a scene from a more superstitious time. The creature's feet ended in cloven hooves and the demon's body was a rusty color. Its head was flanked by the horns of a ram and it had 8 spider-like eyes.

The demon marched forward and roared. "BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!"

It proceeded to cut its own wrists with its massive horns. The blood flowing from the wounds coalesced into two massive axes. In a flash, numerous UNSC personnel were cut down by the demon.

Master Chief turned to Johnson and shouted over the cries of the dying and the bellows of the abomination. "I need a weapon!"

Sgt. Johnson motioned to the other side of the room. The Spartan and the marines present grabbed the heaviest weapons in the security locker and immediately rushed to engage the foul creature. The mass

fire from the soldiers was wounding the creature, but the thing's smile only seemed to broaden.

"Khorne does not care from where the blood comes!"

A swing of the massive axes cut down seven marines, but the continuous fire eventually took out one of the beat's knees and a volley of submachine gun fire destroyed one of the creature's arms. Master Chief advanced and aimed his shotgun. The demon looked up at the Spartan and hissed.

"Your actions have pleased the Blood God greatly. A pity we do not fight as brothersâ€¦"

Master Chief did not hesitate and pulled the trigger. The entire demon exploded into a cloud of blood as the tower disappeared.

Cortana reappeared into the holoprojector and grimaced. "I hate to be the bearer of more bad news but a fleet has just emerged from the spatial disturbance."

Lord Hood didn't even turn to face the AI, so transfixed by the horrific carnage that had engulfed his bridge. "Covenant?"

Cortana shook her head. "Definitely not. There are no records of any vessels resembling the new fleet."

Warp/Reality Overlay above Luna

Captain Paulos gazed open-mouthed at the world filling the viewports of the _Palma_. It was a glorious sight. He knew that he had to still be in the Warp, that world hadn't existed in millennium. General Sturmn, who had recently returned to the bridge stood beside the naval captain.

"Is something wrong? What world is that?"

Captain Paulos shook his head. "This must be some foul trick of the Ruinous Powers, a ploy to confuse us. Something. We can't be looking at this world! Not anymore!"

The concern in General Sturmn's voice was rising. "Captain! What world are we looking at!"

Captain Paulos craned his neck to look the general in the face. "This world is Ancient Terra!"

2. Chapter 2

High Charity, Covenant Holy City

"There was only one ship."

The Elite spoke as if the weight of glares cast upon him could crush his bones. The cold, unyielding gaze of the Prophets of Truth, Regret and Mercy cut the deepest. Truth, Regret and Mercy were the highest ranking officials in the Covenant. The Elite in the center of the chamber had been summoned to answer for the events surrounding the

destruction of one of the Sacred Rings.

"One shipâ€¦ Are you certain?" The High Prophet of Truth's voice was soft, almost understanding. It was also a brilliant ploy. The High Prophet of Regret was visibly quivering with anger and provided an excellent foil for Truth.

"Yes, the humans called it the Pillar of Autumn." The former Supreme Commander of the Fleet of Particular Justice said matter-of-factly. All this information was already known to the High Prophets. This proceeding was nothing more than a show trial, a stage on which the Hierarchs could cast the blame and show the Covenant that they were still in complete control of the faithful.

"Why did it not perish along with the rest of the Human fleet?" The High Prophet of Mercy struck the armrest of his hover-chair with a fierce blow. It was the first time the elder Prophet had spoken. The irony of Mercy's position was not lost on the Elite. Mercy oversaw executions, law enforcement and the suppression of heresy. The assembled Minor Prophets and Elite Councilors were growing restless. It was obvious the charade was wearing thin.

"It fled, as we set Reach ablaze. I followed with all the ships at my command." He recounted the events enough times in his actual trial and there was no point to altering it now.

"When you first witnessed Halo, were you blinded by its holy radiance? Is that how the humans were able to land on the Sacred Ring and desecrate it with their unholy presence?" Regret's voice was tinged with fury. Truth resisted the urge to shake his head in disgust. It was fortunate his younger colleague was elsewhere, lest he embarrass the proceedings of the council.

"No. Noble Hierarchs, you must understand that once the Parasiteâ€¦" The collected Minor Prophets erupted into a frenzy at the Zealot's perceived excuse. Even the Elite Councilors, who had mostly monitored the proceedings in stoic silence conferred among themselves.

"There will be order in this Council!" Mercy shouted as loud as his ancient vocal cords allowed. The anger at the break of decorum and procedure was evident on his face. Truth motioned with his hands, sending an unspoken message that the elder Prophet should calm himself.

"Your efforts to contain the spread of the Flood were noble and wise, but the actions of this demon, this 'Master Chief'â€¦"

The Sangheli knew that these public proceedings were drawing to a head. There was no doubt that he was going to die. He knew his words and actions during this trial were securing him a painful and gruesome execution. The Prophets had expected him to enter the proceedings and beg forgiveness for his failings. After his devout and pious confession, the prophets would have him executed in the most humane way possible. The Elite had almost nothing left. There would be no more glorious campaigns against the pagan humans. His life as a leader of his brothers was over. He had accepted his fate, but if he was going to die and have everything stripped away at least he would die with his personal honor. The climax of this trial was rapidly approaching.

"By the time I learned of the Demon's intent, there was nothing that could be done."

Once again, the Council chambers erupted into a frenzy. The shouts for order from Mercy were being completely ignored. The Lesser Prophets were shouting various curses and hexes at the defendant. Directly behind the Sangheli, Tartarus, leader of the Brutes scoffed at the spectacle. It would, in his mind, have been better to kill the incompetent one immediately.

The holographic form of the High Prophet of Regret leaned in and spoke to the Prophet of Truth in hushed, but furious tones. "Truth! This has gone on far too long. Make an example of this imbecile; the Council demands it!"

High Prophet Truth nodded slightly and advanced his antigrav throne. "You were one of our most treasured instruments. Long did you lead our fleets with honor and skill. However, your failure to defend Halo was an immeasurable failure."

A Minor Prophet leapt to his feet and pointed violently at the doomed Elite. "Nay, it was heresy!"

As the chamber trembled with the angry voices of hundreds of beings, the Elite in a last act of defiance, glared at the Hierarchs. "I _must_ continue my campaigns against the humans."

The Hierarchs were taken aback by the sudden and deliberate defiance in this disgraced warrior's voice. Up until his outburst, there was a chance the Sangheli could have avoided being declared a heretic. Now, there was no option. The hologram of Regret was looking directly at his two associates. There was supposed to have been no defiance from this one! Mercy was still attempting in vain to calm the collected furies of the Council.

Truth, with a single motion, quieted the chamber. "No, you will not."

The High Prophet nodded at Tartarus and the Brute Chieftain ordered two underlings to drag the heretic from the sacred council chamber. The Elite scowled viciously at the two Brutes and the large simians flinched and kept their distance. The 'heretic' turned his back on the Hierarchs and began the long walk out of the chamber

"Soon, the Covenant will undertake the Great Journey. But when it begins, the weight of your heresy will stay your feet and you will be left behind."

Truth's declaring the Elite a heretic seemed to have calmed the other Prophets. Regret smiled triumphantly and disabled the connection. His hologram vanished in a hissing ball of light. Mercy merely muttered something about 'falling' and turned to one of his aides. No one noticed Truth's slight gesture except its intended recipient. Everything was falling into place.

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

Lord Hood stared out at the fleet that had emerged from the wound in space. The fleet mainly consisted of ten medium sized warships arrayed in a classic escort formation around the three larger ships.

One of the larger ships was a boxy ship, undoubtedly a transport of some kind. The ship's most distinctive feature was a strange symbol displayed on the bow. The emblem was a strange half natural half mechanical humanoid skull encircled by a gear. The other large ships were obviously warships. Unlike the supposed transport, the only visible heraldry was a large golden double headed eagle. The only movement the unknown fleet had made in the few minutes it had been in the Sol System was to move away from the special disturbance. The supreme commander of all UNSC forces felt like he was in a chess match against an invisible opponent. He would have almost preferred the Covenant. At least he knew what to do in that situation. Kill all of the alien bastards.

"Cortana, what have you learned?"

The AI materialized in the Holo-projector. "The unknown battle group is using a type of shielding we've never encountered before, not even on Halo. Our sensors can't penetrate them."

"Good God." It was all Lord Hood could do to utter those two simple words. His thoughts kept returning to the word 'God'. Terrence Hood had never believed in higher powers before. However, the horror that had gripped him mere moments before had made him question the beliefs he had held since his earliest days. All around him was the abominable truth of Hell's existence. The command center of the Cairo was still caked in congealed blood. It was an image from man's most primal nightmares made manifest and the smells only added to the oppressive atmosphere.

The replacement communications officer looked up from his blood-stained station. "Sir, we're re-receiving a, a transmission from the unknown fleet."

Lord Hood took a deep breath and tried to calm himself. Fear gripped him, but he could not afford to show weakness. Not with the survival of Earth in the balance.

"Patch them through."

Exorcist Grand Cruiser _Palma_

The communications officer rotated sharply on the balls of her feet and saluted her captain. She wore their uniforms with pride, like the other members of the _Palma's_ bridge crew. Captain Paulos returned the gesture as best he could and accessed the ships records. His communications officer had just joined the crew of the Palma. Adiso would have to track her progress.

"Lord Captain, we have made contact with one of the orbiting star forts. You may initiate contact at any time."

Captain Paulos' mind was suddenly filled with all the information the _Palma_'s sensorium had collected. The Star Forts, like the numerous ships forming a protective bubble around Terra, were primitive and there was no evidence that they made use of the Warp for faster than light travel.

"Lt. Auldur. Commence transmission."

The officer began working the various buttons and switches with the

efficiency of a servitor.

"Connection established, my Lord."

The image of a naval officer wearing a white uniform adorned with numerous medals and awards filled Captain Paulos' vision, so intertwined was Adiso to the ship he had commanded for nearly five decades. The uniform was obviously a dress uniform. Most striking was the man wearing the uniform. He looked exhausted, comparable to General Sturnn following the pull-out from Medusa V.

"I am Captain Adiso Paulos of the Palma. I greet you in the glorious name of the God Emperor of Mankind, Eternal Sovereign and Lord of the Imperium of Man."

A stunned silence fell over the bridge of Cairo Station. The large view screen, which moments ago had been full of tactical data for the Sol system was now dominated by the image of a withered and vaguely human... construct perched into a throne of some kind. The being, which had identified himself as Captain Adiso Paulos, was literally hard wired into the chair. Captain Paulos was withered, his few visible organic parts appearing atrophied. It was highly unlikely that Captain Paulos could ever separate himself from his command chair. The shock of appearance was nothing compared to the shock of his words. God Emperor of Mankind, Imperium of Man. Everything about these newly arrived vessels was overwhelming. Each ship, even the transport was covered in weapons. It was impossible for the UNSC to get accurate readings because of the shields, but there was no doubt the weapons possessed tremendous power. Despite all this, the assembled UNSC personnel's thoughts returned to the shocking fact that this fleet was crewed by humans.

John-117 was thankful that his helmet didn't allow others to see his expressions. He was in a state of emotional shock. The physical appearance of Captain Paulos was enough to unnerve anyone, including a SPARTAN. Then there was the supposedly human fleet. It was clearly powerful and could easily overwhelm the UNSC fleet if it so chose. Fortunately, they had elected to open negotiations. However, these thoughts were secondary to the haunting words of the creature. The Demon had revealed that something or someone known as The Blood God Khorne had been watching him and taking careful tally of the many enemies John had slain. The fact that the creature had whispered inside John's skull a promise of a further demonstration of his God's power was far more concerning. Behind him, Johnson was scanning the room for any further incursions by the hellspawn that had attacked earlier.

Lord Hood stepped closer to the view screen and stifled the urge to take a deep breath. "I am Fleet Admiral Sir Terrence Hood of the United Nations Space Command Defense Forces. It is our hope that the UNSC and the Imperium can forge an era of cooperation. The UNSC can not afford another war. We are barely holding the line against the Covenant, and now with the arrival of"

Captain Paulos narrowed his eyes. He knew in his soul what Lord Hood was about to say, but was hoping that his fears would not bear fruit. "The Ruinous Powers."

Lord Hood was taken aback. Captain Paulos knew about the demons and once again, his words were shocking. Powers implied that there were

other dark forces besides the Blood God. The Imperial captain's tone was acidic and full of hate. Surprisingly, his hatred was comforting to the assembled UNSC personnel.

"The Ruinous Powersâ€¦ you refer to the demons. One belonging toâ€¦ Khorne attacked this station a few minutes before you arrived. I-I can't describe it. That beast killed several valued members of my crew. It couldn't have come at a worse time. The UNSC believes that a Covenant attack on Earth herself is imminent."

Captain Paulos was already furious at the thought of a daemonic incursion in the Holy Sol system. His next words were spoken in an icy cold voice. "This, Covenant you are waging war against. They are Xenos aren't they?"

Lord Hood flinched at the sight of the sparks flying from the various mechanical augmentations possessed by Adiso. The organic parts of his brow were twitching with a fury the assembled UNSC had never seen in a human being.

"The Covenant consists of numerous alien races. They have been waging a genocidal war against us for nearly thirty years."

"Representatives of the Imperial Guard and Navy, Adeptus Mechanicus and Adeptus Astartes will be arriving shortly to help our forces coordinate with yours for the defense of Holy Terra."

Captain Paulos' voice could only be described as a gathering storm.

Sergeant Johnson leaned in and nudged Spartan-117. "Chief, I think that guy is literally going to blow a fuse."

John turned his head to his friend and comrade-in-arms. "I wonder if the other Imperials'll be as pissed off."

Lord Hood nodded nervously at the vision of fury filling his view screen. "Your assistance is greatly appreciated. We await the arrival of your representatives."

Captain Paulos cut the transmission to Cairo Station and blinked to change the vox to internal communications. "General Sturnn, Brother-Captain Thomas. I request your presence on the bridge. We have urgent matters to discuss."

He then turned his attention to his communications officer. "Lt. Auldur, contact the Tribulum. Inform Princep Madison of the situation and ask him to send one of his most trusted agents."

Lt. Auldur bowed crisply. "My Lord." She immediately turned and went about her work.

The doors to the Palma's bridge opened widely and General Sturnn and Brother-Captain Thomas of the Imperial Fists marched towards the Command Throne. General Sturnn of the Imperial Guard was a formidable man. He stood nearly six and a half feet tall. His khaki uniform was adorned with various medals and commendations. Sturnn considered them trinkets and believed that his numerous scars were the true measure of his devotion to the God Emperor. The general was armed, as always,

with a pair of Lightning Claws with integrated Storm Bolters.

If General Sturnn was a giant among men, then Brother-Captain Warin Thomas was a demi-god. Brother-Captain Thomas stood a minimum of two feet taller than General Sturnn and in his bright yellow power armor was a majestic sight. His armor bore the Chapter's proud clinched fist emblem on his left shoulder guard. Numerous holy wards were attached to his armor with thick red wax seals adding to the majesty of the Astartes captain. Warin was not currently helmeted so his heavily scarred face was visible. In many ways, Brother-Captain Warin Thomas was similar to General Sturnn. The two men measured their service to the Emperor in the number of scars they had collected in the destruction of the Emperor's enemies.

As Paulos' command throne rotated to face the two soldiers, Magos Brafor Micel seemingly materialized from nowhere. It was hard to imagine that one with such a seemingly unusual appearance could be stealthy. The Adeptus Mechanicus representative was barely recognizable as a human being. He possessed far more mechanical parts than organic parts. Magos Micel's eyes were bionic replacements that allowed for a far greater range of vision than natural. The techpriest's left arm was purely mechanical and included numerous wires and data ports that allowed Micel to easily interface with computers. Extending from his back were numerous tentacle-like tools. Some were fitted with saws and other basic tools. Two however, were fitted with modified laspistols. Micel fell into lockstep with Commander Tobias Kale, Paulos' executive officer and chosen representative.

Captain Paulos took a deep breath to calm his fury. "Loyal servants of our Glorious Emperor, you are no doubt aware of the identity of the world we orbit. I have made contact with one of the commander's of Holy Terra's defense fleet. From this Lord Fleet Admiral Hood, I learned of a daemon incursion on one of the orbiting Star Forts. By His blessing, the PDF soldiers managed to dispatch the daemon."

Adiso waited for the angry and shocked talk from the assembled representatives to die down before continuing. ". At this time, our Lord and Protector is still likely still guiding His people from behind the scenes. Thus, Holy Terra is governed by the UNSC and they are fighting a losing genocidal war against a foul xenos confederation known as the Covenant."

Commander Kale stepped forward. "Captain Paulos, if humanity is fighting for its very survival why hasn't He revealed himself?"

Thomas shook his head, barely able to contain his building fury. "The designs and stratagems of the Emperor are far beyond our mere comprehension. Trust in His judgment and wisdom. He would never let Humanity fall to ruin."

"Lord Hood has informed me that the UNSC possess intelligence that the abominable xenos are likely preparing to strike Holy Terra herself. We must aid them. It is our sacred duty. I am unable to separate myself from the Palma. I beseech thee to meet with Lord Hood and help to coordinate the defense of our hallowed homeworld."

General Sturnn began to pace rapidly, unable to contain his righteous fury. "An attack on Holy Terra itself! By the Golden Throne!"

Commander Kale and Brother-Captain Warin's eyes were alit with the flames of hatred. Commander Kale began to pray to the Emperor for the destruction of the Covenant. Warin Thomas merely looked towards the blue world of Terra.

"Captain Paulos, I take my leave to assemble my squad. Contact me when it is time to transport to the destination."

With that, the Astartes left the bridge as an avatar of the Emperor's Wrath. Magos Micel nodded towards Adiso.

"I will return to the Tribulum to assemble some of my fellow techpriests and engineseers. We will contact you within twenty minutes."

The Magos nodded at the captain and practically ran out of the bridge as General Sturnn relayed orders for his command staff and a squad of Karskin to report to the bridge immediately. Captain Paulos knew that through the fury of the soldiers of the Imperium, the foul Xenos of the Covenant would feel the vengeful might of the Emperor.

3. Chapter 3

UNSC Marine Corps Hospital, New Mombassa, East African Protectorate

Colonel Richard Wright glared across the desk at the psychiatrist sitting across from him. This was the first time he had returned to his homeworld in two years. He had survived the Covenant War the best he could. Colonel Wright had numerous notations in his service record citing his rescues of his fellow marines. However, all the suits and REMFs seemed to notice was the repeated reports of his 'uncomfortable aggression'. Why were humans expected to show the Covenant mercy? Why were humans expected to tie their hands when the Covenant repeatedly butchered whole worlds?

Why indeed? Colonel Wright snapped back to reality when he heard those words. They were spoken, not verbally, but mentally. And they were not spoken in his voice or the shrink's.

"Colonel Wright. Thank you for coming today. I hope your return to Earth was pleasant."

"Why am I here?" There was no need for pleasantries. Wright was a soldier fighting for the survival of his species.

Harold Painter, a thin young man with dark hair and round spectacles, sighed. "Your commanders are concerned about some of the tactics your company made use of on Oleander. The reports compare your actions to a berserker fury. The 391st Marine Company executed dozens of wounded and surrendering Covenant soldiers."

Wright snarled at the audacity of this man. "Of course we slaughtered them. Did the Covenant show mercy to Harvest, Reach, Carter's World, Sigma II, the other human worlds they ****burned**** or to the billions

of human civilians they've cut down in their war? I am proud that I spilt there blood!"

As you should be! There is no place for mercy on the battlefield. Blood must flow if there is to be victory!

Dr. Painter nodded. "The Covenant's war is barbarous, yes. But if we give into our baser instincts and desires, what does that make us? We become the monsters we are fighting."

It makes you strong! It frees you from the artificial restraints the fearful place on the mighty and the deserving.

Wright interlocked his fingers and leaned forward. "How many worlds have you fought on, **bled for**, Dr. Painter?"

"My medical conditions prevent me from serving on the frontlines. So I serve in the only way I can."

What right does this man have to speak of service? He is a coward. He fears the primal call of war. Unlike you he is too weak to embrace it. He will project his own weakness upon you. Richard Wright, you know what his decision will be. This wretched creature will deny you battle. It has never been about Earth or mankind, not truly. You thrive on war. It is the only home you have. The UNSC will never accept you or your unit! But I will. With the arrival of the Star Child's pawns, I require a Champion in the Materium. I offer you power and limitless conflict, free from these fictions boundaries. Prove your fealty with a sacrifice.

"You have already made your decision, Doctor. I now know that I have been under constant surveillance since I arrived. You feel that I am unstable and irredeemably violent."

Dr. Painter was taken aback by the tone of his patient's voice. It cut like cold, tempered steel. "I am not sure where you are getting these ideas, but I have not rendered judgment."

Colonel Wright burst into a dark, booming laughter. "Judgment! Who are you to speak of judgment? You are weak! I can see the fear in your eyes when you look at me. Even now, sheer terror grips you! Harold Painter, you have feared this moment since you looked at my service records! You fear the moments I free myself of the chains true warriors have been bound by for far too long!"

Dr. Painter leapt to his feet. "Calm yourself. Explain why you are acting in such a manner!"

An inferno erupted in Colonel Wright's eyes. "The Lord of Skulls demands it! **BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!**"

The air suddenly became slick and the entire room reeked with the stench of blood. In an inhumanly quick motion, Colonel Wright grabbed a letter opener and jumped clear over Painter's desk. Harold Painter never got an opportunity to call for help before a savage blow rendered him unconscious.

High Charity, Covenant Holy City in Orbit around Threshold

Tartarus led a grim procession into the Holy Center of High Charity.

Thousands of Covenant had gathered for today's spectacle. The Hierarchs had decided to make a public example of the heretic. The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae was not surprised that there were few visible Sangheli in the ocean of faithful. If this was not a public occasion, Tartarus would have sneered and cursed the arrogance of the Sangheli. Thus, he took great pride in overseeing the punishment of this heretic Sangheli. It would not erase the shameful memories of his crÄ"che days. The bigotry and abuse he suffered at the hands of the 'Elites' would never be forgotten. However, Tartarus had turned his hateful past into an asset. The Chieftain used his hate as a forge and remade himself. The weakness of his youth was destroyed and he became a warrior of the faith. He had risen through the ranks of his people and transformed them into a mighty hammer in the service of the Covenant.

The crowd was alive with jeers and curses directed at the perceived heresy the prisoner had committed. How quickly the opinions of the masses could change. The Sangheli noticed a pack of Uggnoy practically dancing on the path to his left.

"Heretic! Heretic! Burn the Heretic!" The group chanted over and over again, feeling the Elite's ears until they reached the platform where his punishment was to take place.

Tartarus turned and sneered at the prisoner. "You've drawn quite the crowd, heretic."

The Brute Lieutenants activated the energy shackles and stepped away. The condemned one tugged at the braces, testing them.

"If they came to here me beg, they will be disappointed." The Sangheli's voice was full of fire, even in this hopeless situation. As he looked past the hideous Brute at the masses, he noticed only a handful of Elites. It was a small consolation that his people were not here to witness this embarrassment, but it eased his mind.

Tartarus growled at the prisoner. Even as a heretic, the Sangheli maintained their unwarranted bravado and arrogance. It was fitting to witness one of their most celebrated commanders stripped of all his pride and honors. K'xon Rtau would be cast down. His death would be a victory for Tartarus and his race. Though they would never do so openly, the downfall of such a powerful Sangheli leader would be celebrated in the halls of Jiralhanae ships and colonies.

"Are you sure?" K'xon noted the smile on the lips of the Jiralhanae. As the Chieftain sneered, searing energy raced down the restraints. The energy burned into K'xon's armor and flesh and in that moment K'xon was alone, with only his pain as company.

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

Cairo Station rarely made use of its largest shuttle bay. The platform received most of its supplies from the massive space elevator that connected the station to Earth. Now, it was receiving the envoys of the mysterious Imperium of Man. The meeting that was about to take place would decide the fate of not only the entire human race in the Milky Way Galaxy. However, the Imperials had spoken of Earth in religious tones. Many in the UNSC wanted to know exactly who these humans were and where they came from. They were obviously

powerful and highly militant. Their transport was a perfect example of this philosophy. There was no subtlety in the lines of the craft and it was clearly designed to be easily repaired with only minimal engineering knowledge. Even the landing gave credence to the practical nature of the Imperium's leanings. The craft did not touch down in silence the immense armored weight of the dropship met the deck of Cairo Station with a resounding metallic _Ca-krank_.

Commander Tobias Kale took a deep breath as the ramp of the Valkyrie lowered. Tobias was experiencing a mix of trepidation and elation. He was given the honor of introducing the Emperor's envoys to the UNSC. Tobias was determined to represent the Imperium of Man to the best of his ability. The ramp made contact with the Cairo's deck with a satisfying metal clank. Commander Tobias Kale marched down the ramp and gave the sign of the Aquila. He recognized Lord Admiral Hood from the communiqué's exchanged between the fleet and the UNSC.

"Greetings, Lord Admiral Hood. Permission to come aboard?"

Lord Hood nodded at the young Imperial officer. He was unsure how to respond to the gesture, so Hood saluted sharply. "Permission granted. Welcome aboard."

Commander Kale gave a slight bow. "I am Commander Tobias Kale of the Holy Fleet of the God-Emperor. I wish to allow my associates to introduce themselves."

A large, highly decorated man walked down the ramp followed by three other men. The first man was bald headed and heavily scarred. He was armed with what appeared to be a pair of claws with some sort of magazine fed weapon integrated into them. His face was grim and full of rage.

"I am General Sturnn and honor my Emperor through service in His Imperial Guard. May I present Regimental Commissar Johan Bostic, Father-Confessor Tyros Brahae of the Adeptus Ministorum, and finally Sanctioned Psyker Erik Li."

The UNSC was taken aback by the titles and appearance of each of General Sturnn's command cadre. The idea of a Commissar was somewhat shocking to the assembled Earthers. Commissar Bostic's demeanor and dress did not help matters much. He had dark green eyes and sharp, hawk like features. The political officer had a hat and uniform that looked as though it was lifted straight from the ancient and defunct Soviet Union. The officer's uniform was a mix of dark reds and blacks with a blood red sash dominating his ensemble. Bostic also wore a low slung holster on his left hip containing an ornate pistol and a sheathed sword on his right.

Father-Confessor Brahae almost appeared grandfatherly and was clearly the oldest man in the command cadre. He was dressed simply in a dark green robe with a symbol resembling a double-headed eagle sewn into the fabric. The wicked mace he carried was a sharp and somewhat frightening contrast. Sanctioned Psyker Erik Li could only be described as skittish. His body seemed frail and his robe was ruffled. It was difficult to see the man's face due to the large uncomfortable looking metallic hood that adorned the psyker's head. Strangely, the air grew cold around Li and the other members of

General Sturnn's retinue kept some distance from him.

The next group to descend the ramp was the strangest group yet. Each member had numerous mechanical augmentations. The first 'man' down the ramp had numerous tentacles sprouting from his spinal column. Many ended in tools and mandibles for tool manipulation, but two were obviously weapons. His entire left arm was mechanical and sported numerous computer ports and connecting wires. His right arm appeared normal and was carrying a container of essence and oils. The man also lacked natural eyes and in their place was a strange metallic 'visor'.

"Where is your command center? There is much work to be done and I must contact your station's Machine Spirit."

"Excuse me?" Lord Hood was shocked at the holier-than-thou attitude the half-man half machine possessed.

"I was instructed by my commanders to oversee the installation of a Gellar Field unit I must ensure the consecrate your technology for the glory of the Omnissiah and some form of shields. I am unfamiliar with your technology and I also do not wish to offend the station's Machine Spirit."

"Machine Spirit? I am unsure what you mean, but I'm not sure Cortana would like someone messing with the computers while she's active."

Magos Michel's head arched up. "The Machine Spirits of your technology have _names_. There may be hope for you all yet."

Lord Hood's eyebrow raised an eyebrow. "And do _you _and your associates have a name."

"I am Magos Brafor Micel. My associates are numerous and I wish to waste no more time amusing you with small talk."

Lord Hood motioned for an officer. "Very well, Magos. Lt. Herd, please assist Magos Micel and his entourage in any way necessary. Inform Cortana of the upgrade process and tell her to render assistance in any and all ways

Commander Kale suppressed an embarrassed sigh and took a small step forward. "Our final guests, representatives of the Adeptus Astartes should be arriving momentarily."

As if Tobias' words were a cue, a second transport arrived. The new arrival was much more heavily armed and armor. The craft touched down with a surprising amount of grace for such a large vehicle. Despite the amazement the UNSC felt at the sight of the dropship, the passengers invoked an even stronger sensation. Awe is the only emotion that could accurately describe the feelings of the assembled UNSC troopers. The figures were all wearing bright golden-yellow armor with a black fist proudly displayed. The five members of the Imperial Fists Tactical Squad were standing at attention in a semicircle formation. Three of the Marines were armed with standard issue bolters and one was armed with a heavy bolter. The center Space Marine armed a chain sword and a plasma pistol with a stepped forward and nodded.

"I am Brother-Captain Warin Thomas of the Imperial Fists' 4th Company. The Sons of Dorn are honored to defend Terra once more."

High Charity, Covenant Holy City in orbit around Threshold

The noise of his burnt armor falling to the ground was the loudest sound K'xon had ever heard. Even the shouts of the crowd were as nothing next to the destruction of all he had strove for and achieved. As sight returned to his eyes, he saw the glee in the eyes of the Jiralhanae carrying out the public portion of the 'heretic's' punishment.

Tartarus took a step forward and basked in the energy of the crowd. He was truly carrying out the will of the Covenant.

"There can be no greater heresy than failing to defend the Sacred Rings. Through his failure, he denied us all salvation! Let him be an example to all that would defame our Covenant!"

The crowd erupted as Tartarus finished speaking and grew even louder as the Brand rose from its grav-column. The Chieftain stepped forward and, to K'xon's eyes, looked like a daemon. The sensation K'xon experienced when the Brand made contact with his already wracked body was not pain. Pain, as most beings consider it, failed completely to encompass the scope of K'xon's agony. He had managed to remain silent throughout his tortures, but the Brand was a tool of Hell. All K'xon could do was release a tattered scream of suffering before he succumbing to the darkness of unconsciousness.

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

There had been immediate recognition between John and the Imperial Fists of each other's nature. The conversations between the naval officers did not concern the SPARTAN or the five Adeptus Astartes. Brother-Captain Thomas approached John.

"The otherâ€| naval infantry seem to hold you in esteem. It is obvious that you are something more, not merely a member of an elite unit."

John-117 raised an eyebrow behind his helmet as he noted the avoidance of the word Marine by the Astartes. "I was taken as a child and placed in a super soldier program. We SPARTANS underwent genetic and otherâ€| modifications. I guess our exploits have become legendary."

Brother Captain Thomas nodded. "I also joined the Imperial Fists at a young age. The Holy Process of becoming an Astartes is difficult and only the most worthy survive."

John felt slightly uncomfortable at the religious overtones permeating the Imperium. "Only half of us survived the augmentation process."

The tinge of pain in the Master Chief's voice was not lost on the Captain. "The past is the past and we cannot alter it. The future is more worthy of our attentions. Now, I believe we should focus on the defense of this station and Holy Terra."

Master Chief nodded. "Right. I'll show you to the first defense station."

The exiting super soldiers had to circumvent a small religious service led by Father-Confessor Brahae. The Karskin troopers were all kneeling in prayer and a group of UNSC marines and sailors had gathered to watch the service. Spartan-117 was surprised to see Sgt. Johnson among the spectators. As the prayers ended and the Imperials dispersed, Private Daniel Zhou leaned over and nudged Avery in the shoulder.

"So, let me get this straight Sarge. We're being saved from a mysterious genocidal alien empire of religious fanatics by a mysterious genocidal human empire of religious fanatics?"

Sergeant Johnson lit another cigar. "Yeah, pretty much."

"Ok, just wanted to make sure I was reading this situation right. They're not going to ban porn are they?"

High Charity, Covenant Holy City in Orbit around Threshold

K'xon welcomed the return of sight to his eyes. The pain wracking his body and the stench of the Jiralhanae were not as welcomed. He did not know where he was, but he knew he was not at the City's Center anymore. The only sound he could hear was the conversation of the two Brutes dragging him down a corridor.

"Ugh, why must we drag this refugee? Any of the cells will do!"

The second Jiralhanae nodded in the direction of a cell full of Jackals. "Let's just throw him in with that lot. They could use the meat."

The first Brute hissed back at the second. "Them? What about us?! I haven't eaten since before the Branding and his flesh is seared just the way I like it!"

Tartarus did not turn to face his bickering lieutenants, but the tone of his voice made clear his intentions.

"Enough! The Hierarchs have something 'special' planned for this one. His Imminence Truth and His Most Magnanimous Mercy have ordered us to bring him to them with no new injuries."

En route to their destination, the Brutes had to pass through a gauntlet of Sangheli Honor Guards. The Guards were famous for their emotional reserve, but Tartarus and his lieutenants could feel the anger and hate seething from the Elites as they witnessed one of their people's greatest generals degraded in such a fashion. Though the gauntlet was non-violent, animosity hung thick in the air. It seems only the unifying presence of the Covenant's core faith and the will of the Prophets keep the Sangheli and Jiralhanae from open warfare. Rumors persisted of skirmishes between Brute and Elite garrison units on remote planets. However, High Charity and the Covenant Fleet had remained free of such infighting.

Tartarus and his entourage finally entered the facility the Hierarchs had specified. The three Brutes entered and knelt before Truth and Mercy.

"Noble Hierarchs. I have brought the Heretâ€¦"

Truth never even turned his gaze upon Tartarus. "You may leave Tartarus. Take your Brutes with you."

Tartarus was surprised by Truth's order and dared to raise his gaze. "But I thoughtâ€¦"

Truth turned his eyes upon Tartarus for the first time since his arrival. "Were my instructions unclear?"

The Jiralhanae Chieftain turned to his two lieutenants and muttered. "Release the Prisoner."

With that the trio of Brute Warlords exited the chamber. Tartarus was annoyed, but did not question the Hierarchs. Djakarta, however, was fuming. The Sangheli, even ones declared heretics were given special treatment. Why do they deserve such treatment? Why were they so loved?

Why indeed?

Djakarta was about to call out in surprise when the jovial voice hushed him.

Quiet my child. It would not be wise to reveal our conversations just yet. I have been watching you. I know of the disease you carry in stoic despair and of the suffering you have experienced at the hands of the so-called Elites. The Hierarchs and the 'Prophets' hold no love for you or your people. But I am willing to accept you. I will give you the love you desire. I will turn your infirmities into a strength. I will give you gifts of power. Soon, I will reveal my sign. When you witness my signal, carry out the sacrifice and I will embrace you as a son. I will elevate you to above all others in this galaxy. Have patience and endure, Djakarta, my son.

Djakarta merely grinned. His associate Braticus noticed the smile and leaned in closer to his friend.

"What are you smirking about you fool?"

Djakarta turned to face his old comrade. "I was just thinking about my Papa."

"You're growing senile! Your father died fighting years ago."

Djakarta shook his head. "My Papa lives in me."

The three Brutes had been gone for several moments before Truth and Mercy turned their gaze upon K'xon. The fallen Elite had nothing, no arms, clothing or standing in the Covenant. All K'xon Rtau had was the Mark of Shame. He was nothing.

Truth was the first to speak. "The council decided to have you burned on a pyre and your corpse displayed on a pike at the City Center. Ultimately, the terms of your execution are up to me."

K'xon was on his knees, with a hand futilely attempting to hide the

Mark. "Death has already claimed me."

Mercy chuckled. "Indeed. However, how death claimed you will not be in the manner you expected."

Truth allowed for Mercy's smugness. "Do you know where we are, K'xon Rtau?"

K'xon dared not look at anything but the floor, lest he defile this most Holy place. His voice was hushed with reverence "The Mausoleum of the Arbiter."

Truth nodded. "Correct, you are in the presence of the vanguard of the Great Journey. Every Arbiter from Alpha to Omega rests in this sacred place. Each one born in times of Strife and Chaos."

Mercy's ornate hover-throne inched forward. "The Taming of the Hunters, the Grunt Rebellion. Without the Arbiter, our Covenant would have fractured ages ago.

K'xon continued to stare straight ahead. "Even kneeling, I am not worthy to be here."

Truth lowered his hand from the sweeping motion he had made. "You rightly bear the blame for Halo's destruction. The Council wasâ€|blinded by emotion. Their judgment wasâ€| excessive. We know you are no heretic."

Truth activated a small holo-unit on the arm of his throne. The projection that appeared was of an Elite wearing strange armor K'xon had never seen. "This is the true face of heresy. He wishes to subvert our Faith and incite rebellion against the High Council."

The small projection stirred to life and gestured violently. "Our prophets are false! Open your eyes, my brothers! Noble Sangheli! They use the faith of our forefathers to bring ruin to us all. The Great Journey is a lâ€|"

Truth cut the transmission suddenly. "This vile heretic and his followers must be silenced."

Mercy nodded sagely. "Their slander offends all. His filth must be purged."

K'xon, still cradling the Mark of Shame as if it were an open wound looked up for the first time since entering the Mausoleum. "How can I serve our Covenant? I have no banner to rally fleets and soldiers to."

Truth took a deep breath and raised his head. "Not as K'xon Rtau. He is dead. But, reborn as the Arbiterâ€| You would be set lose against this heresy with our blessing."

The stylized casket descended and opened to reveal the sacred and ancient armor of the Arbiter. K'xon Rtau stared silently at his absolution. This was his chance to prove his Faith. There could be no greater honor. The Arbiter was a sacred duty. He gathered his resolve and rose to his feet.

"The council?"

Mercy smiled darkly. "The tasks you will undertake as the Arbiter are fraught with peril. Suicidal. You will die, as all your predecessors have. The council will have their corpse."

The Elite gazed for what seemed like an eternity at the sacred armor. He found his eyes wandering among the hundreds caskets lining the walls. In that moment, he reached for the helmet. Despite its age, there were no imperfections. The armor was everything K'xon Rtau was not. In that moment, K'xon Rtau died. As he placed the helm upon his head, he was reborn.

The Arbiter turned to the High Prophets of Truth and Mercy. "What would you have your Arbiter do?"

4. Chapter 4

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

Magos Micel offered a libation to the machine spirit as the other techpriests continued to recite the prayers to the Machine God. The same crowd that had been watching Father-Confessor Brahae's service was nervously stood back from the Adeptus Mechanicus group.

"What. The. Hell?" Cortana materialized in her holoprojector and crossed her arms.

Magos Micel bowed slightly towards the holo-projection of Cortana. "We are merely consecrating your systems in the name of the Omnisiah. It would be an unforgivable sin for such a strong Machine Spirit to succumb to the Ruinous Powers."

"Consecrating? Oh my God, you have to be kidding!"

"Yes, as I already said, this is to prevent you from being consumed by the Forces of Chaos if there was another Daemon incursion. We can't have you becoming corrupt and turning against the light of the Omnisiah now can we? If it is your wish, we can begin installing the Gellar Field immediately."

Cortana looked directly at Lord Hood and flashed an epic 'you owe me' look. "Fine. I'm not sure about this mysticism, but I don't want to become a plaything for some hellspawn."

Magos Michel's expression grew dark at the perceived affront. "This 'mysticism' has protected the Adeptus Mechanicus from Chaos for longer than your Earth has had writing! Your ignorance is tragic, but forgivable. I endeavor to complete with the precision of the mechanical."

UNSC Marine Corps Hospital, New Mombassa, East African Protectorate

John Painter stirred at the sound of numerous soldiers milling about and the whimpering and pleas for mercy from numerous hostages. As he looked up, Colonel Wright stood and greeted several soldiers. The other soldiers stood at attention and waited.

Colonel Wright took a deep breath and bellowed. "Blood for the Blood God!"

Dozens of voices shouted in return. "***Skulls for the Skull Throne!***"

The prisoner of the Berserkers looked up. "What is this? Why are you doing this?"

Colonel Wright spun the letter opener in his hands. "Because we are the _FUTURE!_ The Forces of Chaos cry out for your soul!"

John screamed in defiance. It was a feeble attempt to hide his fear. "Soul? A myth of a primitive time!"

Richard kneeled and looked directly into Painter's soul. "Oh, how you will pray for that to be true."

Richard and his Berserkers proceeded to slaughter their hostages in a sacrifice to their new Patron God. Blood flowed forth and congealed into the Rune of Khorne. The air became slick and reality began to bend and change. It was a scene from Hell itself, but for the new followers of Khorne, it was _glorious_.

Covenant Phantom en route to Threshold

Rtas' Vadumee walked among his Elites and Grunts. He quietly observed the various rituals each warrior was undertaking before the battle. Rtas' knew it was the time.

"Brothers! Comrades! When we joined the Covenant we took an oath!"

The Sangheli responded in unison. "By our standing, all without exception"

Rtas' continued the Crusader's Prayer. "By the blood of our forefathers, on the blood of our sons! We swore to uphold and defend the Covenant!"

The Elites continued the prayer with the proper response. "Even with our final breath."

The Special Operations Commander nodded. "Those who forsake this oath, cast aside their duty, are heretics. Heretics deserve neither mercy nor pity. Even now, they use the sacred technology of the Forerunners to broadcast their lies!"

A host of Sangheli voices finished their role in the Crusader's prayer. "We shall burn their souls to ash."

Rtas' voice rose to a crescendo, but his voice's volume was lessened by the damage to his left mandibles. "And continue our march towards Glorious Salvation."

The prayer complete, the mission commander approached the Arbiter. The presence of an Arbiter spoke to the importance and difficulty of the mission. However, he knew of the history of this Arbiter. It was a small matter of comfort.

"You wear the armor well, but it will never obscure the Mark."

"There is nothing that can."

Rtas' nodded slightly. "You are the Arbiter, the will of our prophets," He glanced over to his assembled soldiers. "but these Sangheli are under my command. Their lives matter to me yours does not."

"Good. That makes two of us."

The assembled Phantoms continued towards their objective, a Forerunner gas mine. The Heretics had seized the mines and had repulsed several assaults. A massive storm was approaching the facility and would prevent any further attacks for several days. The assault had to be carried out immediately. The Covenant simply could not spare anymore time. The Covenant landing craft made their final approach as Tartarus' voice spilled into the cabin.

"Be warned, the storm will hit the facility in a few hours. Our assault must succeed before then, or we will not be able to escape it."

The Covenant combat troopships slowed and hovered over the designated landing zone. Their heavy plasma cannons charged and ready to protect the troops as they disembarked through the gravity lift. Covenant Special Operation troopers leapt from the grav lift and quickly moved out to predetermined positions. The last Sangheli to leave the Phantom was the Arbiter. The former K'xon Rtau ignited his Plasma Sword. It had been nearly 150 years, but the Arbiter had returned to war.

High Charity, Covenant Holy City

The Prophet of Disdain waited outside the Hierarchs chamber. The sect he represented was infuriated by the 'pardon' of the Heretic. Disdain sighed darkly as the doors finally opened and Disdain entered the Sanctum of the Hierarchs. Two of the three High Prophets were seated on their gravity thrones and almost completely oblivious to the Lesser Prophet's entry.

"Noble Hierarchs of Truth and Mercy, I greet thee."

The Hierarchs turned and nodded at the newcomer. Mercy was the first to speak.

"Ah, Disdain! It is good to see you. You sent a message ahead of you. What is it you wish to speak to us about?"

"A number of your fellow San 'Shyuum has expressed their displeasure at the pardon of the Incompetent. His execution would have been a reinforcing moment for our faith. Numerous members of the Council demand an explanation."

Truth's gaze narrowed and bored into Disdain. He knew that his decision to have K'xon Rtau killed as the Arbiter would cause controversy, but he had never expected it to force the Prophet of Disdain into action. Disdain's position in the Covenant Hierarchy was twofold. First, he was to air the dissenting voices and facilitate

compromise within the Prophet community. Second, he was to root out accusations of 'witchcraft' or attempts to experiment with the sacred technology of the Forerunners. This development was troublesome, but could be easily handled.

"I believe your accusations of a pardon are somewhat premature, Brother Disdain."

The casual dismissal in Truth's voice was infuriating. "Please enlighten me, Noble Truth."

"The former K'xon Rtau is now the Arbiter. We have sent the Arbiter to quell the Heresy at Threshold. You can assure your flock that K'xon Rtau will die."

The Arbiter! How in the name of his gods could that heretic be elevated to a position of such prestige? His execution was crucial to maintaining control!

"Why was the council not informed of this?"

Mercy's gravity throne inched forward. "You know the histories of the Arbiters. His death is assured."

Disdain's voice and choler were rising to match his name. "He is a heretic! The Arbiters are the harbingers of the Great Journey. Do you have any idea what that means?!"

Truth practically hissed. "Enlighten us, Prophet of Disdain."

_HOW DARE YOU! _Disdain wanted to scream all manner of hexes at this foolish one, but he knew his gods would never forgive him for acting so rashly.

"The position of the Arbiter guarantees that K'xon Rtau will join the faithful on the Great Journey!"

Mercy shrugged his shoulders. "Perhaps, but his actions will destroy a much direr heresy and his death will be confirmed by some of our finest Sangheli warriors."

Disdain was furious and could bear to hear no more of this horrid turn of events. "Very well, I shall inform the concerned Prophets of your decision."

Truth watched as Disdain stormed out of the Sanctum. The lesser prophet reminded him of Regret and it worried him. Prophets that forsook cold reason and measured meditation on their faith before making choices were an uncontrollable element. As he contemplated the course of action he would have to take with Disdain, he noticed Mercy shake his head darkly. It was an intriguing observation.

"Is something the matter, Mercy?"

Mercy turned to face Truth. "There is something brewing. I feel like the weight of time is bearing down on us. Perhaps, I fear that darkness is closing in."

Truth nodded, indulging the ruminations of an ancient and quite possibly dying old comrade.

"You need not worry, old friend. Our Covenant will persevere, as it always has."

Mercy smiled weakly. "You are right, of course."

Truth smiled, of course he was right. He was Truth after all. As Truth marveled at his own superiority, Disdain was fuming over his superiors' pardoning of the incompetent. He couldn't report back to the councilors in his current emotional state. Prayer. Yes, prayer would help greatly. He would seek guidance from his gods. Their wisdom would guide him.

Cairo Station, Earth Orbit, Sol System

Lord Hood wasn't sure he'd ever get use to the sight of the Adeptus Mechanicus techpriests. The multitude of cybernetic enhancements seemed to alter their humanity.

"Magos, I wish to extend my thanks for all your help."

Magos Micel waved a hand. It was unsettling to Lord Hood that a number of his attachments mimicked the hand motion.

"I merely do my duty. All of us play our roles that the Deus Machina designed for us."

Lord Hood nodded. Magos Micel was a tough person to read, more so for his tendency to go from an understanding and steadfast defender of humanity to a sarcastic bitter cynic at the flip of the hat. Words began to form in his throat when Cortana materialized in her projector.

"Sir, Io reports they've confirmed Slipspace wake."

The Lord Admiral nodded His face became a mask of war. "Alert all commands, General Quarters!"

Cortana crossed her arms. "Willco. Wait oneâ€¦ Slipspace ruptures forming, off our clusterâ€¦ NOW!"

The Slipspace ruptures were nowhere near as violent as the breaching of the Warp that heralded the arrival of the Imperium of Man, but an immense amount of energy was released. Covenant cruisers and carriers halted their advance. On the UNSC channels, Admiral Harper connected and his voice was full of hate.

"This is Fleet Admiral Harper. We are preparing to engage."

"Negative, Admiral. Form up around the Cluster. Something's not right. The fleet that burned Reach was 20 times this size."

"Aye, Lord Admiral. I must state my disagreement."

"Protest noted, Admiral." His gaze turned from the massive screen filling with tactical information to Cortana. "Cortana, you have the MAC. The second they're in range, open up."

Cortana nodded "With pleasure." The AI disappeared into her

projector. A section of the tactical screen blinked and the visage of Captain Paulos appeared.

"Lord Admiral, numerous xenos boarding torpedoes are inbound. Our escorts will engage the moment they are in range."

Lord Hood stared at the sensor readings. "Thank you, Captain. They're going to make a go at taking our MAC guns off line. It'll give them a straight shot at Earth."

Captain Paulos' eyes narrowed, rage and hate intermingling on his face. "Then they shall fail! The Emperor Protects!"

With that, the tactical screen began calculating the vectors the Covenant boarding craft were using on their approach. Lord Hood activated a com channel.

"Master Chief, Sergeant-Major Johnson and Captain Thomas. Sit Rep."

"This is Sergeant Johnson. We're in position. When those sonuvabitches hit, they'll likely try to go for a decap strike. Don't worry sir, if it ain't human, we'll kill it."

As Johnson ended his transmission, Brother Captain Thomas's voice boomed over the vox. "Lord Admiral, Brother Van and I are position at the Space Elevator platform. Brothers Ioannes, Rhys and Azarias are guarding the primary generator.

"Excellent. Good hunting." A new incoming transmission called for Lord Hood's attention.

"Lord Admiral Hood. This is General Sturnn. I have taken command of the forces defending the habitats. We've fortified the entrances and other key areas."

Hood was not thrilled with the idea of an Imperial whom he knew little to nothing about commanding his marines. Unfortunately it seemed that he had little choice in the matter.

"Very well, General. Beware of boarders. The Covenant likes to force entries at unlikely points. Those Elites are clever devils."

General Sturnn grunted. "We will hold and they will die. There is no middle ground."

The general cut the transmission and Hood was left staring at the tactical data. The approaching Covenant boarding craft and Seraph fighter/bombers racing towards the Cluster seemed to take forever to reach the range of the Imperial escorts. The batteries of the Sword-class escorts came alive spewing walls of laser death. Distant flashes of light were all that marked the demise of dozens of Seraph fighters and Covenant boarding craft. The Covenant made a steady advance, even in the face of the overwhelming fire from the Human fleet. The combination of sheer luck and sheer numbers was all that allowed the Covenant needed to reach the stations.

Inside the station, the reverberations of the boarding craft latching onto their designated entry points. A voice came over the com system to the defenders of Athens and Cairo stations from the Marine

commander on the Malta.

"Athens, Cairo. This is Malta. They're latched and in standard formation. Little bastards up front, Squidies out back. Good Luck."

On Cairo station, the UNSC troopers, Imperial Guardsmen and Astartes warriors waited patiently for the inevitable. The heavy bulkheads began to glow as the Covenant burned their way through. Throughout the station, human soldiers readied their weapons as the Covenant forced their way into the facility.

Sergeant Johnson chambered his .50 cal and pointed to the white hot glow on the airlock door across the room from his position. "I want a field of fire on that bulkhead. I don't want a single piece of inhuman shit to step foot in this room."

As if the Sergeant-Major's words triggered some pre-scripted event, the airlock exploded open and dozens of Grunts and their Elite handlers surged forward. Plasma and solid slug shots were set loose. The air was filled with battle cries, the screams of the wounded and the terrified. The opening act of the war for Cairo Station had begun.

Sierra-117 emptied a submachine gun clip into a charging Sangheli. A flash of light betrayed the collapse of the Elite's shields. Years of vicious war had taught the UNSC marines that Elites formed the core of all Covenant resistance. Instantly, the soldiers fired rounds upon rounds at the alien commander. The Sangheli was reduced to a bloody pile of viscera. John frowned at the carnage for he recalled the words of the Daemon he had banished to the Warp earlier. The blood spilt in this battle would empower the Dark God of War.

I do not kill for Chaos! I fight for mankind! Khorne shall not claim me! The declaration rang clear in his mind. All doubt melted away and he felt as if weight was lifted from his soul. The Master Chief's resolve was renewed and he threw himself into the maelstrom of combat once again.

Threshold Gas Mine

The hiss of blood evaporating against the heat of the blade of a plasma sword was the only sound that signaled the beginning of combat. As the Arbiter's victim dropped to the ground with a slack thump, the rest of the assault force stormed the entrance. The death of the Heretic Sangheli did not cause the traitor Uggnoy to flee. Instead they closed ranks and laid down suppressing fire with their Needlers in an attempt to retreat. The Arbiter found himself admiring the Sangheli that had trained these Grunts. That leader would have been a boon to the Sangheli and the Covenant had he not turned against his oath. The Arbiter rolled out of cover and fired a volley of rounds from his Plasma Rifle and dropped the enemy congregation.

A SpecOp Sangheli fell in behind K'xon. "These Heretics are well trained, Arbiter. It is little wonder they repelled the Jiralhanae mobs sent to subdue them."

The Arbiter nodded. "That maybe so, but we must keep or focus. There is much war ahead of us yet."

Loyal Uggnoy were the first through the breach into a large chamber with numerous gas containers moving along massive conveyer belts. The Covenant troopers knew from experience fighting in Forerunner installations that the containers were highly explosive. It was the perfect place for an ambush and the Heretics obligingly launched their attack when the first group of Uggnoy reached the center of the belts. A veritable wall of plasma streaked towards the SpecOp Grunts and several canisters exploded. Though several Grunts fell, the Covenant's counter-ambush was sprung. Half a dozen stealthed Sangheli materialized behind the Heretics and traitors and let fly with Holy Flares and precisely aimed Carbine shots. The radioactive slugs from the Carbines dropped the shields of the Elites allowing the plasma grenades to destroy the massed Heretics in a violent explosion of viscera and energy.

The confusion at the sudden attack allowed the Arbiter, Rtas Vadumee and the other SpecOp Sangheli to slaughter the remaining traitors. No words were exchanged between the Sangheli, not even through the silent hand signal based language they had used in secret since before even the Covenant. The fact their enemy was led by Sangheli made the potential gains from using the Battle Language minimal. In silence, the Covenant warriors advanced further into the abyss.

The Arbiter took point. As he advanced he felt a pressure in his mind. It wasn't a voice or even what most sentients would consider a coherent thought. The 'sound' in his mind felt strangely lonely and almost child like. The Arbiter almost swore that it reminded him of a child calling out for its parent. It was a troubling development, but he didn't see any of his fellow Sangheli reveal any signs that they had felt it. K'xon Rtau filed it away as unimportant and continued his purge of the Heretic forces.

5. Chapter 5

Cairo Station, Space Elevator sector

A pair of Uggnoy peeked around a corner in the bowels of Cairo Station. The Elites in charge of their unit at least had the courtesy to give them Needlers and a few Holy Flares. Takyet was the first around the corner. His Needler shook as he sniffed for the distinct and rather disgusting smell of humans. The second Grunt, Wicut, rounded the corner a short time later. The younger Uggnoy was nervously searching every shadowed nook and cranny.

Takyet turned around and snapped at his comrade. "What you doing?! No need to search there! Humans much too big to hide there. Make good grunty hiding spot thoughâ€¦!"

Wicut took cover behind a packing crate. "Me know that we need be careful. I has bad feeling about this!"

Takyet didn't even attempt to hide his sarcasm. "You have a bad feeling about everything."

After a few beautiful moments of quiet, Wicut decided he needed to talk again. "Hey Takyetâ€¦ Why all enemies breathe oxygen? Why no one breath methane like normal?"

Takyat stopped in his tracks. "That good question. But shut up. We need to find Big Lift."

"Boss! Do you think there are more Demons?"

"You dummy! There is only one! HUGE DEMON!!"

Wicut came up behind Takyat. "Bad joke, very bad joke!" The Uggnoy looked up and terror gripped him. "I just wet self."

The Uggnoy pair gazed upon the most horrific creature they had ever seen. It was a scene from the darkest of their nightmares. The monstrosity was massive. The Demon was as tall as an Elite and even broader than a Brute. It was clad in golden yellow armor decorated with numerous pictures of winged human skulls and clinched armored fists. The helmeted eyes glowed with the red fires of hell. The worst part of this monster was its voice. On the most basic level, the language it spoke sounded human. However, it was as loud as thunder and wasn't like any other human language the Grunts had ever heard.

"Frater-Centurion! XENOS!"

The creature readied his massive weapon as a second, more horrifying demon appeared. The second demon wore the same armor as the first, but carried a banner most prominently decorated with a large double-headed bird of prey above the clinched fist symbol worn on each demon's right shoulder on his back. The demon did not have the big human-style gun; instead it wielded a massive glowing cannon that howled with an unnatural fury. Worse, it carried a massive sword armed with what looked like the teeth of all the lesser monsters the demon had killed.

"Hos xenos no son dignos neco con hos pius tornilladores!"

Wicut turned to flee, but a massive armored fist crashed down upon his skull, utterly crushing him.

Takyat dove to the right and activated his com unit. "DEMONS AT BIG LIFT!"

Those would be the last words Takyat ever spoke. Brother-Captain Thomas kicked the unfortunate Grunt across the room, leaving him little more than a luminous blue blood stain on the far wall.

Threshold Gas Mine

The lift moved with annoying sloth. While the Arbiter's three comrades didn't have to worry about their active camouflage overheating and failing, the Arbiter's own stealth unit wouldn't last forever. One of the Sangheli took an unseen step forward.

"The Sacred Warriors of the Holy Rings! Why are they siding with the heretics?"

The Arbiter's words were quiet, but carried immense weight. "Hold your tongue. We must be silent and swift."

The Arbiter exited the elevator and readied his plasma rifle. The

hanger was swarming with Heretics and Forerunner Sentinels. Strangely, the opposing forces weren't focusing on the elevator. The Covenant Loyalist maneuvered to a position to observe the heretics.

"Be on alert, brothers. Our enemies are closing in around us. The Prophets have sent another force to silence us!"

The Heretic Sangheli motioned with his Carbine. The Grunts and lesser Elites took up more appropriate military positions. The time they had wasted would cost them. The Arbiter tossed a plasma grenade into a group of traitor Grunts. Ignoring the panicked cries of the 'stuck' Uggnoy, the other Elites concentrated their fire on their counterparts in the Heretic ranks. The screams of the wounded were momentarily overshadowed by the detonation of the plasma grenade. Sentinel beams swept along the massed organics attempting to eliminate the hostile interlopers. The Sangheli warrior who had first noticed the sentinels was praying to the Forerunners even as he cut down their guardian creations. Slowly, the hanger fell silent as the last of the heretics and sentinels were cut down by the Arbiter and his comrades.

"Arbiter! There is something you should see!"

The Arbiter walked over to a collection of bodies lying reverently in the corner. It was obvious that these dead Sangheli had not been killed by any weapons in the Covenant Arsenal. There were no plasma burns or the tell-tale shrapnel wounds of the barbaric Jiralhanae weapons visible on the dead. Instead, it appeared as if they had been cut with a bladed weapon of some sort. K'xon knew that many Brute weapons had blades tacked on, but these wounds were most certainly not caused by Brute weapons. Brute arms didn't cause such horrifying infections in those they cut down.

"No Honor Blade or mongrel Brute weapon caused these wounds."

Behind closed doors, the Sangheli had quietly, and some would say heretically, embraced the human designation for the hated Jiralhanae barbarians. Names among the Sangheli were the highest honor an individual could achieve. The way humans catalogued everything was highly insulting to the 'Elites'. Sangheli viewed humans in a conflicting light. On the one hand, they despised their casual naming of themselves and others. Among the younger Sangheli, there was a growing wave of human sympathy. Many juveniles and even some elder warriors had voiced their admiration for the tenacity and dogged courage of the human infidels.

The youngest warrior knelt beside the corpse. "Holy Arbiter. I've never seen anything like this. Could it be the Parasite?"

The Arbiter shook his head as he headed towards the Hanger door controls. "No, the Parasite bludgeons their foes with their tentacles and their combat forms prefer to use ranged weapons. If it was the parasite, there would be no bodies to bury."

The Phantom slid into the hanger as a sword slides into its sheath. A group of Sangheli soldiers and Uggnoy fighters disembarked and replaced the force that had fallen to the Heretics. Rtas 'Vadumee descended the gravity tunnel last. The hum of his sword was evident as the SpecOp commander approached the Arbiter.

"Hail, Arbiter. We must hurry. The Storm approaches."

The Arbiter merely nodded and led the forces further into the complex. The corridors the Covenant troops passed through were strangely vacant. Rtas 'Vadumee and his soldiers were cautious, believing they were nearing a Heretic ambush. The Arbiter however, continued to 'hear' the 'cries' of the presence he first encountered in the conveyor belt room. K'xon was loathe to describe the 'pressure' as hearing or feeling it. It simply was. As the Sangheli approached, the 'pressure' in K'xon Rtau's mind began to increase in coherency. The Arbiter was shocked by the predatory nature of the presence in his mind. Also shocking was the fact that there was a quasi-conversation happening.

Prey. Near.

Scent strong.

You that position. You . There.

The door in front of the Covenant squad slid open and the troops poured in to secure the area. K'xon and Rtas were the last to enter the large plaza like room. Rtas sniffed at the air and his mandibles rippled in disgust.

"What is that? The Parasite never smelled like that."

The Arbiter shook his head. "It is not the parasite. It is something else. They are preparing to attack. We must be ready."

The other Sangheli merely looked at his associate and nodded. "I trust your judgment Arbiter."

A Grunt called out to his commanders. "Holocom!"

A group of soldiers surrounded the globe like communicator. The other soldiers arrayed themselves in a defensive semicircle. A blur manifested above the globe and in a few seconds, the features of the Heretic leader were clear.

"An Arbiter, I'm flattered. The false Prophets must be desperate to keep we Sangheli blind to the true threats of the universe. I have seen the **Truth**, Arbiter. There are horrors in this galaxy that will destroy your very soul. I entreat you, my brothers, listen to me! Save our people!"

Rtas reignited his sword. "Show yourself! I will end you're betrayal of your oath."

The hologram of the Heretic smiled. "**Good**! It seems the San Shyuum have not robbed you of the steel of our ancestors."

The Arbiter spoke next. "Enough talk, I will have you silenced."

The Arch-Heretic nodded. "I admire your resolve Arbiter. I rallied to your banner, before your ascension. I bear you no ill will, but I will fight even you."

The Hologlobe fizzled and the Heretic leader faded away. The other Elites and Uggnoy started to disperse and head for the room's exit. The Arbiter, however, stood silently near the projector. They were coming. Time seemed to slow as K'xon spun to his left and aimed his plasma rifle at the shape leaping from an overhead archway. His target was so incredibly fast. The creature sliced its scythe-like talons at a Sangheli's back. The shields buckled under the attack and left him exposed to the assault from claws that cut through the combat armor like a knife through cloth. The bipedal creature roared at the now fully alert Covenant troops. Spittle flew from its mouth and its large disgusting tongue whipped at the soldiers.

One of the Elites bellowed in rage. "What is that abomination?!"

Even as the first Elite spoke, more of the monstrosities stormed the plaza. In an instance, the horrors were in their midst. Fire from the Plasma rifle became sporadic because of the risk of friendly fire. The battle had become a bloody melee. The shrieks of the unknown attackers and the war cries of the Sangheli drowned out the screams of the dying.

Threshold Gas Mine, unknown location

"Father Nurgle, your lost child has returned to you. Through the trials of despair and through the pain of disease, I have grown stronger. Your love and blessings shall sustain me. In your name, I shall spread the joy of your Rot and the depths of your love. Bless your children O Great Lord of Decay. We persevere by your grace!"

The buzzing of carrion flies and the smell of decay filled the air. Braticus and his pack nearly gagged at the corruption of the room. Worse was the sight of the worshipper praying his heresies with a childlike grin.

"Djakarta! What in the names of the Forerunners are you doing? This is heresy!"

The Jiralhanae rose from the putrid symbol on the floor and continued to smile. "The Forerunners? What have they done to deserve divinity? They killed themselves. When faced with despair and a pestilence of great and terrible power, they lit their rings and died. Those moralistic humanoids are not gods! I have found a true, loving god!"

The Jiralhanae were enraged at the flem-laced blasphemies spewing from their former comrade. Braticus sneered. "Wretched creature, I will not allow you to inhabit the body of my pack-mate! I will destroy you and end your unholy existence!"

"You can not destroy the ****future. ****And here it comes!" The air became thick and slick as a pus-like mucus began to spew from the walls. A great and terrible buzz came from deep within the pipes surrounding the room. The sound came in waves as the source of the dreadful noise pounded against the pipes. Djakarta spread his arms wide as the unending swarm of flies poured from the now destroyed pipes. The untainted Brutes opened fire with their spikers and plasma rifles. Their efforts were in vain. The attempts to stem the tide of the Destroyer Plague were as effective as trying to extinguish a star

with a lake. In the end, all the Jiralhanae could do was scream. In the end, all Djakarta could do was smile.

Cairo Station, Habitat Alpha

Commissar Bostic placed his laspistol against the skull of a wounded 'Elite'. "Suffer not the Xenos to live!"

The flash of the laspistol splattered the alien's brain across the floor. Imperial and UNSC forces had repelled several concentrated Covenant attacks on the entrance to the Habitats. At first, the UNSC marines had been wary of the Imperials. However, as the Imperial Guardsmen had directed their energy rifles at the Covenant the wariness eased. Despite, the growing ease of interaction between the Guardsmen and the marines, the UNSC troopers didn't exactly trust Sturmn's command squad or the Kasrkins. Sturmn and his close aides fought with horrific abandon. Sanctioned Psyker Li was especially unnerving. He was always cackling while in battle and the air around him was always cold. His strange abilities didn't help matters. The Kasrkins were highly effective warriors, but the UNSC marines kept them at the same distance they kept ODS'Ts. Anyone who charged a sword-wielding Elite in order to engage it in a sword with it _couldn't _be normal. Strangely, the Kasrkin who chose that course of action actually won the duel.

UNSC Sergeant Ross Keller approached one of his Imperial counterparts. "Hey buddy! Mind if I ask you a question?"

The Imperial nodded from his covered position. "Go ahead." He extended his hand. "Sergeant Rogal Kolak."

Keller shook Sergeant Rogal's hand. "Sergeant Ross Keller. Are all Kasrkins that hard core? I've never seen anybody take a Squidie with a sword in hand to hand."

Rogal smiled. "Yeah, pretty much. Everybody from Cadia, my home, is trained as a soldier from the time we can walk. They choose Kasrkins from the kids who can field strip their lasguns by age 6."

Ross's jaw dropped. "By God! What kind of planet are you from? Some kind of jungle world that tries to kill you everyday?"

"That's Catachan. Cadia's actually a very nice world. Great climate, good soil. The only problem is how close we are to the Eye of Terror. All those frakking Chaos raids keep trying to destroy everything humanity had fought so hard to build."

Keller couldn't believe the deadpan tone Sergeant Kolak delivered his statement in. "Wait, Chaos? You're world is regularly attacked by those monsters?"

Rogal took a sip from his canteen and frowned. He spoke the words like they were common knowledge to all. The Cadian was completely oblivious to the shock of his UNSC compatriot. "And worse. Only by the Grace of the Emperor we have survived."

The conversation abruptly ended with a forward position screaming. "They're back!"

Elites and Grunts surged around the corner under the cover fire of a

plasma turret. The humans ducked behind cover. Most of the humans at least. Father Brahae and a pair of Kasrkin leapt over the barricade and stormed towards the Covenant.

"**For the Emperor!**" Father Brahae shouted as he swung his mace at a Grunt. His Rosarius absorbing some of the plasma pistol shots. The pair of Kasrkins opened fire with their Hellguns and dropped an Elite and the grunt meatshields. The UNSC marines were not enjoying being outdone by their crazy religious cousins and decided to join the fray. The Covenant troops were taken aback by the sudden violent charge by the Humans and fell back under the cover of the plasma turrets.

General Sturnn left his cover and walked towards the soldiers continuing to take pot shots at the retreating Uggnoy and Sangheli. "Hold your fire! Conserve your ammunition!"

The fire stopped and the soldiers turned their faces towards the de facto joint commander of Habitat Alpha's defenders. Sturnn's voice was harsh, but his face held the ghost of a smile. "Well done, everybody. Sergeant Keller— What do you know about those Xenos turrets?"

Sergeant Keller was surprised that the Imperial had even bothered to figure out his name. "Plasma Turrets? They're pretty nasty, not Shade nasty, but still. I've never seen one run out of ammo. Rumor has it the Flood bled them dry on Halo, but no one's sure. Quick to set up. I've used them a few times to cover a retreat or two. They have an overheat problem. That's why you'll never see 'em rock'n roll."

Commissar Bostic grimaced in disgust. His voice quivering with barely controlled rage. "You've used xenos weapons?"

Keller merely nodded, ignoring the anger building in the Imperial Commissar and Priest. "Once or twice, sir." Ross motioned towards Earth "I've got kids down there and I was out of ammo. I swore to God that I'd get my men back home and that my kids wouldn't be another pair of war orphans. I did what I had to do."

Sturnn attempted to hide his distaste at the use of alien technology. "I can understand your desires, but I do not approve of the use of Xenos technology. How does this 'Covenant' utilize these turrets?"

Keller shifted on his feet and flashed a glance towards the killing field. There were dozens of dead Grunts and a satisfying number of Split-lips. Ross noticed that the Covenant still didn't use Bravo Kilos or Jackals in boarding actions.

"Most of the time, it'll be a trio of Grunts. One manning the turret, a spotter and another to guard the rear. The watch generally carry Needlers, so it ain't smart to blindly charge 'em. There's probably a squad between us and that turret."

Sturnn nodded. "Sergeant Keller, what would you need to take out those turrets?"

Keller closed his eyes in thought. "Normally, I'd need at least two squads other than mine. I think between my squad and one Guard squad

could do it. Those plasma BFGs and lasguns will be a huge help."

Sturnn motioned to Sergeant Kolak. "Sergeant, gather you're squad. You're going to hit those turrets and take that position. We'll use that as a forward position to begin our push against the xenos filth."

The pair of Sergeants saluted. "Sir, yes sir." The thought of actually attacking the Covenant position instead of sitting around and waiting was music in the ears of the human soldiers. UNSC marines and Guardsmen from the two squads congregated away from the others to plan their breakout.

High Charity, Prophet's Quarter

Secret doubt was a worm in the soul of any being. It gnawed away at the mind and spirit of those who refused to acknowledge it. Doubt thrived in the darkness of denial. The longer it was ignored, cast aside, the stronger and more virulent it became. As long as it was kept sequestered in the shadows, the faster it would grow. It would consume and destroy. The only manner that could successfully destroy the curse of doubt was to drag it kicking and screaming into the light. Doubt had to be confronted and analyzed to be defeated.

The Prophet of Disdain had long been prisoner to doubt. His faith had been steadily weakening. Disdain had begun to question the divinity of the Forerunners. He had never seen evidence of the Forerunners answering the prayers of the faithful. So, one day he had offered his prayers to any gods that would answer. His prayers were answered by a voice of the True Gods. It had borne the words that established the faith of the Triad. Disdain had then quietly sought out others who had shared his former doubts and introduced them to the Triad. Several Prophets, Brutes, Grunts and even a pair of Hunters had embraced the truth. The execution of the Incompetent was to have been a moment of glory where a servant of his gods would gain entry into the Material universe.

"Why are the Hierarchs such fools?"

"Why indeed?" The voice was deep and full of ancient power and hate. The Prophet of Disdain wheeled around to face the massive figure that had materialized in his quarters.

The figure was massive, easily taller than a Brute and heavily armored. The armor was dark red and decorated with numerous skulls and the Eight Pointed Star of the Triad. Numerous excerpts of holy texts were placed around his armor. The skulls and helmets of his enemies hung at his belt. He wielded an oversized energy pistol of some sort and wielded a wicked looking scythe. Most striking was the horned helmet. It radiated power and the will to dominate.

"Who are you?" Disdain struggled to hide his awe. Truly this was a representative of the Gods!

"I serve the Gods and there is much work to be done."

Disdain rose from his kneeling position. "I will serve, but what am I to call you, Emissary?"

The massive figure put down his weapons and removed his helmet. Disdain was shocked. The face of the Gods' messenger was human! The giant human's face was pale and scarred. However, the eyes stood out most. They glowed with a pure white light. No pupils or other features could be seen.

"I am Eliphas the Inheritor and I bear the Word of Chaos."

Forerunner Gas Mine, Threshold

The Arbiter rolled away from the slash of the creature. The abominations that had attacked them would, in the distant future, be known as Genestealers. These monstrosities had been bred to infiltrate worlds and destabilize them before the assault by the main Tyranid force. Genestealers were wickedly quick and deadly close quarters fighters. The Covenant soldiers had discovered this to their chagrin. Death had quickly claimed the Uggnoy. The talons and claws of the Genestealers had literally ripped them to shreds. Even Sangheli had fallen to the onslaught of the Genestealers. Even with the warning of the Arbiter, the enemy had achieved near total surprise. A force of Covenant Special Operation troops had been mauled and nearly destroyed.

K'xon Rtau tossed aside his plasma rifle. It was useless at this range. The Honor Blade hissed as it activated. The Arbiter lunged and managed to slice off the Genestealer's right scythe arm. A piercing scream of agony filled the room. It provided just the opening the Sangheli needed. The Plasma Sword raged forward and severed the Genestealer's head. The Arbiter did not even spare his foe a glance as he turned to assist a younger warrior who was struggling against one of the remaining Genestealers.

"Prone, Taqriume!"

The Elite immediately went prone as the Arbiter leapt over his comrade and stabbed the creature in the chest. The Plasma Sword plunged into the enemy and nearly pierced through the Genestealer. The last ounce of the Genestealer's strength was used to attack the Arbiter with a sharp, blade like growth that exploded from its mouth.

The last Genestealer fell to a barrage of fire from a small group of Sangheli. As the monstrous foe took its last gasp, the assembled Elites bellowed a proud war cry. Rtas Vadumee moved forward searching every inch of the room for more entry points that the Genestealers could use to renew the assault on the battered Covenant survivors.

"Report! How many of our brothers fell?"

A Sangheli grimaced as one of his fellows used his plasma rifle to cauterize his severed right arm. "All twenty Uggnoy have fallen. Ten of our brothers have been claimed by death in the cowardly ambush. Six of the survivors, including myself, are too wounded to continue. Forgive my laxity; Proud Arbiter, Commander Vadumee."

"There is no blame." Rtas 'Vadumee turned to the Arbiter. "Arbiter, carry on ahead. The Oath Breaker must be silenced. The Survivors and I will collect our dead and lead the wounded back to the

Phantom."

The Arbiter looked down at a pair of corpses. A Sangheli had pulled himself up a scything claw of one of the Genestealers in order to get close enough to shoot the monster in the face with his weapon. The sight filled the Arbiter with a melancholy pride.

"Understood. The mission must be completed. We owe our fallen that much."

The surviving Sangheli, even the wounded, grunted their agreement. Commander Vadumee picked up the Plasma Rifle the Arbiter had discarded and tossed it to his associate. K'xon caught the rifle and nodded at the other survivors. The walking wounded were the first to head to the exit. K'xon turned to head to his exit. There was no more that needed to be said to his comrades. The Arbiter was thankful for the respite in his mind. During the battle, the proximity to the Genestealer's 'presence' had been a disorienting experience. Thankfully, the presence had disappeared as the last Genestealer had died. His plasma sword hissed as it was deactivated. The Arbiter engaged his active camouflage and carried on alone.

Cairo Station Recreation Plaza A

This had once been a beautiful and relaxing place. Many member of Cairo Station's crew contingent had often come here to remind themselves of the worlds that had been lost and the worlds that still cried out for protection. It had once been a place of peace inside the belly of a war fighting station. John had remembered his first visit to this place. The crew of the station, both civilian and military had taken such pride in caring for the plants. The Spartan believed the military personnel loved this place because it gave them an opportunity to grow and cultivate life.

Of course, the Covenant had to destroy this place of hope like they had destroyed everything else. At times like these, John's hatred of the Covenant was strongest. His hate was not that of a soldier hating his enemy. This was a primal hatred. It was the hatred for which human language failed to accurately capture. In simpler times, Spartan-117 would have enjoyed the rush of destroying the enemies of Man. That was before the revelation of the Warp and the foul and all consuming evil that tallied each kill and each drop of blood spilled in combat. Despite this new unease, John would not abandon his duty. He had dedicated most of his life to protecting humanity through force of arms. He would not stop now. If needed, he would never stop.

Sergeant Johnson aimed his Battle Rifle and fired off a burst. "Keep moving marines! We've got to push on to the hangers!"

John fired a controlled volley of submachine gun fire into a group of advancing Grunts. "I've got point."

Spartan-117 moved forward under heavy fire from a pack of Grunts and their Elite handler. The forward Grunt succumbed to the numerous bullets that riddled its body. Despite, the intense fire coming from the UNSC troopers, the Covenant continued to advance.

"Fire in the hole!"

Daniel Zhou shouted as he let a frag grenade fly. In an instant, nearly an half dozen aliens had been shredded by shrapnel. The pair of surviving Elites attempted to fall back, but Master Chief leapt into their midst. The Spartan II managed to partially decapitate the Major Domo Elite by emptying the last of his submachine gun clip. The Minor Elite managed to avoid Master Chief's backhand. It growled at the humans from a kneeling position and then leapt towards John in a rage. A beam of coherent light pierced through the alien's skull and it dropped a mere foot in front of 117.

"Those personal shields are quite the boon. I must study yours, Spartan. They would be a blessing for the armies of the Adeptus Mechanicus and the rest of the Imperium of Man."

Magos Brafor Micel stepped into view. His tentacled attachments scanning the plaza for incoming Covenant. "

My Skitarii guards have secured the elevator to the hanger. Hurry, more Xenos boarding craft have been launched and our fleets are too embroiled in combat to engage such targets."

The marines nodded and fell in behind the tech priest. Littering the path to the elevator were numerous Covenant dead. There was something unnerving about all the dead that tugged at the back of the minds of the UNSC personnel.

Sergeant Johnson fell in lockstep with John. "Chief. You notice the dead?"

Chief nodded, and behind his masked frowned. "Yes sir. All the Covenant we've seen so far have been headshot'ed."

Avery checked the magazine on his rifle. "You'd need reflexes like a machine to make so many headshots."

Magos Micel turned his head. "Of course. All members of the Adeptus Mechanicus have cast aside the weak and fallible flesh and embraced the strength and precision of the mechanical."

There were no replies from any of the UNSC personnel. Many wanted to ask how the tech priests of the Adeptus Mechanicus could throw away pieces of their humanity so readily. However, the desire to maintain good relations with their new allies quickly put a damper on these thoughts. The Skitarii emerged from cover almost as soon as the human soldiers had entered the room. There was absolutely no movement as the Tech Guard awaited instructions from their commander.

Magos Micel flashed a momentary and unseen smile at the precision of his guard. He then turned to the UNSC marines. "The elevator is secure, but we have little time. The Xenos reinforcements have likely arrived by now."

John-117 nodded. "Affirmative. Let's go."

The soldiers filed into the elevator and descended into the primary hanger of Cairo Station. As soon as the doors slid open, the sounds of combat filled the soldiers' ears or audio sensors. Orders, war-cries, taunts and shouts of pain poured from dozens of alien and human mouths. Spartan-117 and the Tech Guard surged forth and laid into the Covenant. The marines followed behind, but were not as swift

or as durable as the armored Spartan or Tech Guards. Plasma fire cut into the human ranks and several marines fell.

Chief tossed a grenade into a pack of charging Grunts. The subsequent explosion ripped the cannon fodder soldiers into pieces. The shields of the MJOLNIR were partially depleted by a burst of an Elite's Plasma Rifle. Inhumanly accurate fire from the Skitarii dropped the remaining Elites. Terror gripped the remaining Grunts and they attempted to find refuge. All they found was a wall of fire from the surviving UNSC marines.

Corporal Jack Chambers stood at the hanger doors and stared in the direction of the Malta. "Hey, Malta's beaten off the Covies."

John joined the other marines at the doors. The internal communicator in the MJOLNIR's helmet crackled with the chatter between the command centers of the Cairo and the Malta.

The first voice John heard was that of Cortana. "Malta, status report."

An unknown marine jubilantly called over the vox. "We beat them! They're bugging out!"

The jubilation for the supposed victory was short lived. Malta Station and all aboard lives where ended in a flash. Cairo Station was battered by the shock wave generated by the absolutely massive explosion.

"Dear God!" It was the only words anyone seemed to be able to say for a long time.

The next voice heard was Lord Hood. "Cortana, Magos. I need an assessment, yesterday."

Cortana responded almost immediately. "The Malta was destroyed by a Covenant bomb. I'd say deep within the station."

Magos Micel huffed. "Obviously. It was a high grade explosive. Undoubtedly, it was in an ammo storage facility."

Lord Hood's voice was furious at the loss of life. "Then they sure as hell brought one for us and the Athens. Master Chief, find and disarm our bomb. Athens, send any and all forces and locate that bomb!"

Sergeant Johnson nodded at John. "Go ahead, Chief. We'll push on and try to link up with the Imperial Guardsmen and other marines."

Chief nodded. "Willco. Good luck Sergeant."

John descended into a service tunnel and pushed on towards his objective. He knew that he was the only soldier who was capable of reaching the probable location of the bomb. The Astartes were the only other soldiers that had the skills to reach and disarm the Covenant bomb. However, the Imperium's super-soldiers were locked in combat with a massive number of Covenant boarders attempting to seize the Elevator to the heavily populated city below. Once again, John found himself in a desperate battle not only against the forces of the Covenant, but against time itself.

6. Chapter 6

Sol System

A UNSC destroyer drifted listlessly after being gutted by a column of Covenant Plasma. Fire poured from gaping wounds that somehow were still venting atmosphere. Shields flared with the impacts of various munitions. Fighters danced around lumbering capital ships. Splotches of light and flame betrayed the distant doom of both Covenant and Human vessels. The war had finally come to Sol. Humanity was a cornered beast and fought with the ferocity of one.

Confusion was rife throughout the Covenant fleet. They had not expected this world to be occupied by the humans, much less be the most fortified system yet encountered in the war. Human 'Super MAC' platforms were wreaking havoc on fleet coherency. Only a few ships had been gutted by the tungsten slugs fired from the human weapon stations. However, they were the least of the fleet's worries. The human infidels had somehow produced several shielded warships. The smallest of the new warships were acting as screens against the waves of Seraph attack craft. Far more troubling was the pair of large vessels scything their way into the heart of the Covenant formation. It was interesting to note the religious motifs that were evident on the shielded ships. There had been no evidence that religion played any role in the UNSC. Covenant theorists had believed that the humans had cast aside all religion or had never embraced any faith at all. It was one of the many reasons the Covenant were in the right in this war. The endless strings of victories were a testament to this fact.

The Prophet of Regret slammed his fist onto the arm of his gravity throne. "Why haven't the other two stations been cleansed by holy fire?"

A Sangheli turned and bowed to the Prophet. "The forces we have sent have encountered heavier than expected resistance. We will purge their filth and secure your route, Noble Prophet of Regret."

Regret nodded; his voice fiery with rage. "Very well. Concentrate fire on the human behemoths! Cleanse the pagan constructs from this system!"

Cairo Station, Space Elevator

Brother-Captain Warin's Chainsword ripped and tore through yet another Covenant 'Elite'. The pieces of the xenos commander fell into an ever growing knoll of the slain. Fire from the small cannon fodder troops was sporadic and tinged with fear. Without the lash of their overseers, the smaller troops would often turn and flee before the might of the Astartes. The space elevator had become a tomb for nearly a hundred alien soldiers. Covenant corpses were piled into mounds. Plasma scorches were evident on the walls from the impacts of both Covenant and the plasma pistol of the Astartes captain. Battle-Brother Van had not even drawn his bolter at this point into the battle. His combat knife sliced through armor, shields, bone and flesh. Where ever the Astartes stood, none would live.

"Brother-Captain! The Xenos are falling back."

Warin fired a plasma blast into a group of fleeing Covenant soldiers. There were no screams as a Grunt was reduced to a burnt husk. The Astartes had heard the transmission from Lord Hood and felt the shockwave that heralded the death of the Malta Station. Warin had said a quiet prayer so that the souls of the human defenders would find their way into the Emperor's embrace. The discussion between the Adeptus Mechanicus Tech Priest, the machine spirit of the Athens and Lord Admiral Hood had put forth the likelihood of a Covenant bomb on board the station. That revelation caused a terrible truth to dawn on the Astartes. The Covenant likely wanted to use the space elevator to deliver a bomb to the proto-hive of Cairo.

The Astartes captain practically hissed. "These creatures are persistent if nothing else."

A click informed Brother-Captain Thomas of an incoming vox transmission. "Brother-Captain, Azarias reporting. We have just repelled another Covenant assault on our position. The last attack lacked the intensity of the previous assaults."

The Astartes Captain nodded. "The last xenos attack was not as ferocious as the previous ones. Stay vigilant brothers."

"In the Emperor's Name." Azarias closed the connection with his captain and rejoined his battle brothers in their defensive vigil in the station's generatorium

The mechanism that operated the space elevator activated and a klaxon began to sound. Brother-Captain Thomas motioned to Brother Van to check the computer monitor. "What is happening, Brother?"

Van looked up from the console. "A force of UNSC troops are being deployed from the surface of Blessed Terra."

The Astartes Captain nodded. "Force Disposition?"

Van's gaze returned to the screen. "Nearly three platoons."

Thomas activated his internal vox unit. "Brother-Captain Thomas to Lord Hood."

"Lord Hood here. Situation report, Captain." Lord Admiral Hood's response was concise and his voice hard, focused solely on the battle for Terra.

"We have repelled several Covenant attacks. Tell me of the reinforcements coming from Holy Terra."

In the command center of Cairo Station, Lord Hood bristled at being ordered by a Captain. "Three platoons of ODSTs have been dispatched from the Sinai."

"Capabilities?"

"Comparable to your Kasrkin."

The Brother-Captain shook his head. The Kasrkin were the fiercest and most capable non-Astartes warriors humanity had ever fielded. The

Space Marine had no doubts that the chosen of Cadia would have bristled under such an insult. Brother-Captain Thomas ignored the ignorant statement. "Are they in possession of heavy weapons?"

Lord Hood sensed the dismissal and gritted his teeth. "Sinai Command informs me that they have several squad automatic weapons and three flame turrets."

"Excellent. We will await their arrival before moving out." Warin closed the vox connection and resumed his scanning of the primary entrance and the two blast wounds the Covenant had repeatedly used to enter the elevator docking station. The Astartes waited. It wasn't clear what they were waiting for, the arrival of the UNSC soldiers or another Covenant attack. However, they were Astartes and they would be ready for whatever fate awaited them.

Forerunner Gas Mine, Threshold

Djakarta's bloated form stood over the ruined corpses of his former pack mates. The beetle-like creatures that were both the source and actual components of the Destroyer Plague were consuming the pestilent flesh of those too weak or foolish to survive. It pained the child of Nurgle to see Braticus destroyed so completely, but he had denied the power and love of Nurgle until the very end. Djakarta would not mourn him. He had made his choice. The Jiralhanae had cast aside his empty worship of the Forerunners in order to embrace the truth of Grandfather Nurgle. A rustle from behind the Chaotic Brute drew its gaze from the blessed work of the Destroyer Plague. One of the other Brutes had sold his soul to the Lord of Decay in exchange for salvation.

"This is the power you have embraced, pack-mate." It was not a question, but a statement of affirmation.

"Glorious is it not? This is the power of a _God_. Do you now realize how empty that hollow covenant truly was?"

The Brute had formerly been known as Ator. "I can see it so clearly now. The mist obscuring the True Path has been lifted. Death to the False Prophets!"

Djakarta extended a necrotic, vermin infested arm and rested it on the shoulder of his compatriot. "Death to the False Prophets! Come, we must secure passage from this place. Nurgle shall guide us to our new brothers."

The plague bearers spoke a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for the Gifts of Nurgle and turned to leave this fell monument to the false, impotent deities of the Covenant. As they picked up weapons, a winged insect flew from a festering wound in Djakarta's left arm. The Forerunner chime filled the room. Djakarta rolled his eyes at the infuriating sound. Every warp damned door in every Covenant or Forerunner facility played that chime when they opened.

A squad of the renegade Sangheli passed through the door, but stopped in revulsion when they saw the creatures standing in front of them. Superficially, the two horrors resembled Brutes. However, they were both horribly bloated with leprous blights. The closest Brute's left arm was monstrous in both size and appearance. Insects crawled out of gaping, rotting sores and repeated the same horrible croak.

Nur...gle. Nur...gle... Flaps of flesh and fur swayed in an unnatural wind. Worse of all was the smell. Decay filled the now slick air.

One of the Sangheli's eyes widened with realization. "They are tainted!"

Orbs of blue plasma raced towards the abominations. All found their marks, but the newest sons of Nurgle had been deadened to pain. The weapons of the Sangheli hissed as they overheated. Numerous small ports on the rifles sprang open in a desperate attempt to vent the heat. The Plague Brutes moved with a quickness that should not have been possible. Djakarta slashed at the nearest Sangheli with the blade of his Brute Shot with warp enhanced strength. The shields shimmered as the buckled and a second slash cleaved deep into the Elite's chest. A swarm of the winged vermin infesting the Brutes engulfed a pair of Elites and wormed their way into several of the Sangheli's throats, suffocating them. Ator stabbed an Elite in the chest and emptied a full load of spikes into the heart and one of the quad-lungs of the enemy. The flurry of combat lasted mere moments, but each disease ridden strike was an offering to Grandfather Nurgle.

"Come, Brother Ator. We must move quickly. A plague is about to rupture forth. I am sure that Grandfather will want to divine its nature."

Ator belched forth a flem-laced grunt. "The Parasite. How did it reach this house of the False Ones?"

"It seems that the cancer that laid the Forerunners low will not be removed from their corpse so easily."

New Mombassa

The scent of blood was strong in this place. Colonel Wright stood in the center of the Blessed Rune of Khorne and waited. A small maelstrom of pure, unbridled Warp Energy had manifested near the center of the room. Baleful flames seeped from the storm and inched their way towards the assembled UNSC marines. The torrents of energy almost appeared to be appraising the assembled. A column of flame rose and Wright could easily make out the face of one of the Blood God's servants glaring into his soul. Richard spared a glance as one of his war-band embraced the flames. It had once been Private Samuel Norton. Richard allowed a smile to creep to his face as the Private from the Inner Colony World of Crimea was elevated by the Warp. Power coursed through the Private and the hiss and growl of the flames was temporally overshadowed by the distinct cracking of bones. Still, the soldier did not scream. _What a worthy vessel_. Wright allowed a moment of ego to spill forth. _He_ had shaped these humans into material worthy of Khorne.

The not-Samuel ceased levitating and for a moment stood in silence. The Daemon-host then turned to face Wright. "A surprisingly acceptable host. It seems that some of my brethren have misjudged your band, _Colonel_."

Wright noted the conceit in the not-Samuel's voice. However, he would not dare voice his concerns to a servant of his God. Not yet. "We exist to spill blood in the name of Khorne."

The Daemon grinned. Already, the host was mutating into a form more palatable for the Daemon. The eyes were the color of brass and the teeth that filled the daemon's maw resembled those of a shark. "Quite. Khorne is pleased to accept you into his armies. However, equipped as you are, your band is not ready to glorify the mighty Lord of Skulls on the Holy fields of battle. But, Khorne is generous. He has deigned to share with your company weapons of great power."

A fleshy growth rose from the whirlpool of Aether. The pillar of bone and muscle opened several compartments. Khornate Axes were presented by taloned arms. The Cultists accepted the Axes with exuberance. The not-Samuel stifled a sigh. These mortals were more than he had expected, but they weren't enough to oppose the new enemies. Khorne needed followers. Well, he needed mortal followers until the bulk of the worthy warriors arrived. This manipulation was beneath him. It reeked of Tzeentchian cowardice.

The Daemon approached Colonel Wright. "Take this."

The not-Samuel handed over a surprisingly ornate chain-ax. Wright accepted the 'gift' and bowed his head. "I will not disappoint your kindred inhabiting this ax. It will receive the blood it craves."

The Daemon's eyes narrowed. He did not like this human. Wright was far too perceptive. "I am sure it will. The time for wasteful small talk has ended. We must prepare for the deluded servants of the Enemy."

Wright's features became absolutely feral. "Blood shall flow."

Cairo Station, Corridor 3A

Sergeant Keller dove behind a pile of rubble as a burst of plasma pistol fire impacted a few inches away from his head. The Covenant had this area lightly defended. He had expected a higher concentration of Elites. However, he wasn't complaining. Grunts could be dangerous, so Ross wouldn't consider it a walk in the park. They had a surprising amount of strength and there were occasional tall tales of cunning that were actually shocking. The best way to fight to fight the chimpies was to pick off the overseer and take down the Grunts as they fled in terror.

Keller aimed his rifle and fired off a burst into the torso of a Grunt. The creature attempted to scream, but it only managed a gurgle from its ruined chest and throat. A low _thud_ accompanied the distant detonation of a Uggnoy's methane reserves. Ross continued to lay suppressing fire for the advancing Imperial Guard and UNSC marines. Human plasma fire was reducing large swaths of Covenant fodder troops to ash. The already sporadic fire died down as the last handful of Grunts and the final Elite fell back through the door.

Rogal Kolak advanced and took cover behind one of the many hastily assembled temporary blockades. "Sergeant Keller! How's your squad?"

Ross moved up and took a position across the hall from Rogal. "We're good. Only minor wounds. Nothing too serious. There aren't as many

Covenant up here as I thought there would be."

"No complaints from me. Let's push on. The General's waiting on us to take out those turrets."

Sergeant Keller nodded. "Roger that. Will, front and center. When that door opens, toss a frag in there. Thompson and Alvarez, you're first through."

The point men groaned as they moved forward. Rogal motioned to his squad. "Yres and Ollie, I want you right behind Thompson and Alvarez."

The joint command of the two squads was somewhat complicated, but the mission was simple. That helped ease coordination somewhat. However, the whole spiel was bordering on herding cats.

Sergeant Keller and Kolak took position and nodded. Keller whistled. "Go! Move, move move!"

The door slid open and a frag grenade flew through the door and detonated a few feet in front of the Covenant position. Instantaneously, Privates Thompson, Yres and Ollie spilled through the door behind Corporal Alvarez. Covenant plasma fire was exchanged with human bullets and las fire. If the first humans spilled through the portal, the Guardsmen and Marines that followed poured into the room. The Plasma gun carried by Gregor Hikan belched superheated fire towards the entrenched xenos. Mobile Shield barriers collapsed and man-made structures melted and warped under the onslaught. Covenant troops failed to realize that the plasma gun was merely a distraction. Guardsmen and marines were moving to catch the Covenant in a simple pincer movement.

Sometimes, the simple solutions work the best. A barrage of UNSC fire collapsed the shields of an Elite Major Domo. The xenos' life soon followed his shield as Private Thompson drilled a burst of submachine gun fire into the head of the Elite. Human troops leapt over the raised planters. Though they seemed to be decorative, these structures were actually designed to be cover for soldiers defending Cairo Station. Las and solid slug fire flew past Covenant Plasma. The moans and screams of both human and xenos wounded and dying accented the hum of energy weapons and the blasts of slugthrowers.

Sergeant Keller knelt behind one of the Covenant's mobile barriers as he reloaded his rifle. The closest soldier to him was an Imperial Guardsman. Ollie, Sergeant Kolak had called him. The soldier was shouting some form of war chant as he fired into an advancing wall of Covenant Grunts. Keller found the entire battle for this station staggering. There were hundreds of UNSC Marines and almost an equal number of Imperial Guardsmen. Hell, there was even a SPARTAN and a squad of Imperial super soldiers. Astartes, that was what Lord Hood had called them. Even with the host of human soldiers, there seemed to be a never ending tide of Covenant soldiers. Ross signaled for Privates Iverson and Thompson to advance. The UNSC marines advanced under the barking support fire of the UNSC troopers and the humming lasrifle fire. A burst of fire from Ross's Battle rifle battered the shield of an Elite. The Split-Lip took cover and waited a moment before returning highly accurate fire. Private Yres yelled as the plasma fire scorched his flesh.

Rogal Kolak growled like an enraged animal as he poured las fire into the foul xenos that had wounded or killed another of his troopers. He noticed the shimmer that Keller had told him was the sign of the shields failing. He heard Gregor hoarsely recite the Litany of Accuracy as he fired another roaring plasma blast at the enemy. The room suddenly filled with smell of boiling metal that overpowered the smell of flesh-ash. UNSC Marines and Imperial Guardsmen emerge from cover as one. A marine was even the first to reach Private Yres.

"He's still alive! Somebody, get on the box! We need a medic up here."

Sergeant Kolak knelt over the soldier. The flack armor was blackened and areas were pot marked. Yres grimaced and opened his eyes. "Sir, how close are we?"

His voice struggled to keep his traditional enthusiasm. Sergeant Kolak smiled. "We're nearly there. A Medic is on the way. Hang in there, guardsman."

Corporal Alvarez nodded as he closed down the link with command and control. "Sergeants! Medics and a fire team are moving up. They'll be here in five."

Sergeant Keller checked his magazine. "Good. Any word from the General or the Lord Admiral?"

Alvarez took cover. "Aye sir. Evidently, the Covenant has been focusing on those Astartes and Habitat Alpha. General Sturnn reports that he is holding position. He needs us to hurry."

Sergeant Keller tapped Rogal on the shoulder. "Sergeant, we need to move on. I'll leave Privates Iverson and Walsh here with the wounded."

Kolak hefted his lasgun. "Right. Ollie, stay here with the wounded. Everybody else we are moving up. We're nearly there. I can hear those damned Xenos guns already."

Forerunner Gas Mine, Threshold

The Arbiter moved silently through the bleak corridors of the Gas Mine. Contact with Heretic forces had been far too light. All the Arbiter had encountered were ragged patrols. There was something wrong with the whole situation. He approached an armored viewport and looked down. Sentinels floated forward in formation. They had to be searching. _Could there be more of those creatures?_ The thought lingered in the Sangheli's mind like a mist. Snapping back to the now, K'xon stalked forward.

As he approached a door, a horrible thud pounded the portal. The Arbiter activated his active camouflage and drew his Plasma Rifle. The pounding ceased as the door slid open with a chime and a large creature skidded out. It was a reptilian animal with an insectoid carapace. The six-limbed beast righted its footing and flexed its scythe-like talons. Its fang filled mouth hissed as it looked around with wild eyes. A roar exited its gaping maw and it turned and rushed back into other room. K'xon strafed around the corner and into a melee of horrifying implications.

Sentinel raked the room with cleansing fire. The concentrated energy beams were targeting anything and everything. Creatures, like the one he had seen moments before, leapt amongst the alcoves scything at the sentinels. Beasts of similar build, but without the talons rushed forward. They had a sickeningly organic version of the Brute Spiker permanently fused into their forward arms.

A pang of momentary fear gripped the Sangheli warrior as he witnessed _what_ the strange warbeasts were primarily fighting. It was the Parasite. Flood Infection forms scuttled forward without pause, even as Sentinel beams and organic weapon spikes decimated them. Behind them, grotesque Combat forms surged forward like a tide firing scavenged Covenant weapons into the writhing mass of the strange warbeasts and Forerunner sentinels. The Combat forms crashed into their opposing numbers as the Arbiter rushed into the room. He was loathe to cross such a furious battle, but the necessities of his mission demanded that he push onwards. The various roars, hisses and discharges of weapons filled the air. It was almost symphonic.

The Sangheli worked his way along the far wall of the room. In his left hand he wielded his Plasma Rifle. The right hand was bathed in the light of his Plasma Sword. A spinefisted beast was slammed against the wall by a Flood Combat form. The beast shook off the impact and leapt at the combat form and fired wildly with its organic weapons. The Flood responded by firing a barrage of plasma shots into the creature. Carapace was blackened and dented from the shots. The wounded creature bit down on the parasitic monstrosity as a thick black ichor poured from the creatures wounds. A pair of Sentinel beams cut into the beast like a scalpel. The automatons floated past the moaning, hissing creature even as it fired spines in its death throes. Spines impacted mere inches above the Arbiter's head. He rolled for cover and this maneuver saved his life. The mutated arm of a Flood form lashed out at him. K'xon rose to his feet as the Parasite advanced like some ancient predator. The Plasma rifle found its way into the holster at K'xon's side and he entered a defensive stance. The Parasite pounced at the Sangheli and covered a surprising amount of distance. However, the Arbiter had fought the Flood in the past and was not taken off guard by the strength of decaying Flood form. A sidestep allowed the Arbiter to dodge the attack. Honor Blade plasma met the strange organic mesh that made up the Flood form. The Arbiter removed the blade from the Abomination and for a second, it appeared as if the Flood was not finished. Suddenly, the Flood split into two very large and very separate pieces. Without a wasted glance, the Arbiter turned and sprinted for the far side of the room.

The scythed Warbeasts, known to the future as the Hormagaunt, moved as a maddened pack towards the advancing Flood Combat forms. Two waves of living weapons collided with such violence that the vulture-like sentinels actually fell back. Scything Talons carved through the fungal-like growths that defined the Flood while the Parasite crushed the chitin that formed the Gaunt's primary defense. The Tyranid warbeasts and the parasitical shock troops fought with animalistic brutality. There would be no mercy in this fight. The very concept of mercy was completely alien to the ravenous hordes. A pair of spinegaunts leapt onto the strange raised sections of the transport corridor. The Arbiter had been observing the horrific war noticed a momentary hesitation in the spinegaunts actions. Then, he felt _it_ again, the child-like crying out for guidance. After a

single moment, the instinctive behavior to attack reasserted itself. Spines coated in strange and virulent alien pathogens were vomited indiscriminately from the symbiote weapons into the writhing mass beneath them. Somehow, despite the madness born from the isolation gripping them, they managed to hit the Flood far more often than their fellow Tyranids.

"Arbiter! By the Prophets where are you?!" The voice of Tartarus rang clear in the Arbiter's communication unit. _Curse you! You damned dirty ape!_

K'xon Rtau seethed and did not respond. One of the warbeasts redirected its attention from the Flood to the Arbiter. The growling Hormagaunt charging him was a far more pressing concern than the angry threats spilling from the lips of the Brute Chieftain. It inched forward barring fang and brandished its talons. The Arbiter reached to his belt as the Gaunt leapt onto one of the raised alcoves. K'xon activated a plasma grenade. As the creature reared back to strike, Rtau tossed the grenade into the open mouth. There was a loud gulp. A heartbeat passed. The Hormagaunt exploded.

Dozens of eyes turned up on the Arbiter. The Flood were the first to react. The air filled with the strange cries of the Combat forms. In an instant, the leaping monsters were on him. K'xon brought his Plasma rifle to bear as he was slowly encircled by the creatures. One of the Combat Forms lunged at the Arbiter. Plasma shots seared the flesh of the wretched enemy. It took nearly a dozen plasma shots before the Flood fell. A second Flood was upon the Elite in a moment. The crushing blow lowered his shields and he barely managed to dodge the second blast. His Plasma Sword hissed like a maddened beast as it came alive. The Flood charged and blade met flesh. Pieces of what had once been a Heretic Elite fell lifelessly to the floor. The Honor Blade shuddered. The strain on its structural fields was evident. The Arbiter was by far the superior warrior, but the numbers would eventually drown him. He needed a miracle.

The miracle came in the form of the Sentinels. Dozens of sentinels launched an attack into the advancing hordes. The air became thick with the smell of burning flesh and ichor. Flood forms growled and leapt at the hovering Forerunner constructs. Tyranids soldier creatures began lashing out at whatever was closest. The Arbiter ducked and sprinted for the door at the end of the corridor. The Sangheli activated his remaining Plasma Grenades and collapsed the archway above the door.

"**Arbiter! Pray that you are dead for ignoring me!**" Tartarus raged from his distant location.

"I read you, Chieftain. The situation was inopportune for contact. Situation report." K'xon's words were even and completely ignored the tantrum.

The voice of the Chieftain was a brutal cocktail of rage and indignation. "Our forces have come under attack by the Parasite. This mission must be completed with the utmost haste. I am sending a Phantom with reinforcements to your position. Hopefully, if we throw enough of your species at a problem, we can complete the mission before the end of this Age."

The Sangheli ignored the child-like insult of the Jiralhanae leader.

"I will move ahead and rendezvous with them at the next section of the facility."

Cairo Station: Maintenance Corridor Alpha 3

John stood with his back against one of the numerous support pillars dotting the corridor. The pink mist of a group of Needler armed Grunts pounding away at the Spartan's cover. An Elite barked a series of harsh orders at his subordinates. The shattering of the Needler's crystalline ammunition ceased as the Grunts charged his position. John smiled behind his mirrored visor as he thought of the undoubtedly pithy comment Cortana would have for a situation like this. Spartan-117 leaned out from cover and fired a burst into the advancing Covenant troops. A clutch of Grunts fell from the expertly placed shots. The survivors dived for cover. John dashed forward, firing measured bursts from his submachine gun. The commanding Elite growled as he fell behind cover. Chief felt something bump into his foot as he entered cover.

"Well, that's convenient."

Master Chief reached down and grabbed the plasma grenade and thumbed the activation switch. The fuzzy energy bleed off surrounded the grenade as John surged from cover firing his M7 at the Grunts that emerged from their hiding places. The Elite rolled from his position behind a column and fired a burst of plasma at the advancing human. John's shields flared under the barrage and the meter dipped dangerously close to depletion. At the last moment, he threw the Plasma Grenade. The device hit its mark and stuck to the Sangheili warrior. John barely managed to dodge the revenge melee attack and somehow get into cover before the Elite exploded.

The last active Spartan-II rose to his feet. John simply walked past the smoldering pile of ash that was formerly his target. John knew that time was against him. The Athens was reporting that the Covenant had likely placed the bomb in the MAC loading chamber. They were facing heavy resistance and were throwing everything they could at taking that chamber before it was too late. John took a deep breath as he reached the hatch leading to the storage dump for Tungsten shells of the defense cannon. The chamber reverberated with the impact of the MJOLNIR armor.

"Chief, do you copy?" Cortana's voice filled his internal com unit.

"I copy Cortana. Sit rep?" John spoke quietly, even though he knew his helmet would not let his voice betray his position.

"Good news or bad news first?" Spartan-117 could almost see Cortana smiling wherever she was.

"The bad, considering it probably affects me the most." He hugged the wall as he advanced, timing his steps with the groans of the loading mechanism.

"You'd be right. There are at least a half a dozen Elites guarding the bomb. Have fun, Chief."

"Sometimes I worry about you Cortana." A massive tungsten slug screeched as it was loaded into the firing mechanism. John caught a

glimpse of one of the Elites guarding the bomb. Cortana laughed over the com.

"Be careful."

John nodded, even though the gesture would go unseen. "Aren't I always?"

The connection closed and Spartan-117 checked his ammunition. His submachine gun was down to half a clip. He had a few extra clips, but with the number of Elites his ammo wouldn't last long. He also had his shotgun and a handful of shells. Like always, Master Chief would have to get creative and hope his luck held out. This wouldn't be easy and the Elites were too smart to fall for simple tricks.

_God I wish I had some grenades _was the first thought that popped into Chief's head. Then, inspiration struck. John aimed at the ceiling and fired his M7 into the air. Two of the Elites opened fire with their plasma rifles at John's position to cover the advance of their comrades. The SPARTAN-II began falling back into the depths of the cannon facility. A plasma grenade detonated a few feet in front of John, causing his shields to fluctuate. Almost immediately after the explosion, a pair of Elites advanced firing controlled bursts of fire. The narrow confines of the conveyer system limited the Elite's maneuverability and numbers. Spartan-117 drew his shotgun and pulled the trigger as soon as he saw the edge of the Elite's head round the corner. The shield's buckled under the 8-gauge assault and Master Chief responded immediately with a second shot. A deafening howl of pain accompanied the death of the targeted Elite. The second Elite began to fall back as Chief advanced. Shells clinked against the cold metal deck as the Covenant's Demon advanced. The shotgun blasts rendered the Elite defenseless and Chief crippled the Sangheli with a shot to the knee. A viscous smash with the weapon's butt crushed the alien's skull.

There were now four Elites. John grabbed a Covenant grenade off the corpse of the last Elite he killed and activated it. The grenade flew left and the human super-soldier ducked right. Elites took cover from the explosion. One of John's adversaries rose from his roll and growled as he realized that his torso was less than three inches from the barrel of the shotgun. He swung his Needler viscously, but Chief merely dropped to one knee and pulled the trigger. There was no way the Sangheli's shields could stop a blast at that range. The Elite flew backwards nearly three feet with a gaping wound in its chest. It was dead before it hit the ground. His cover man opened up with his Carbine and managed to hit the Spartan several times. John dropped his shotgun and drew his M7 and returned fire. The exchange resulted in the collapse of both soldier's shields. John broke into a dead sprint and closed the gap with the Elite. Before the alien could react, Chief leapt into the air and dropped kicked his target. The Major Domo fell backwards and his skull was impaled on one of the numerous spikes surrounding the Covenant bomb.

There were now two Elites. Alarms blared in Spartan-117's helmet as his shields recycled. Chief thanked his suit that it's recycle time was nearly twice as fast as his last suit. The thought that he had just carried out an Imperial ritual never crossed his mind. John grabbed a plasma rifle from the impaled Elite and took a deep breath. He rose from his crouch as the shield display in his helmet reported they were fully charged. Time seemed to slow as he emerged from cover

and fired his weapons at the remaining pair of Elites. The dark blood of his foe splashed from the wounds inflicted by the caseless rounds. The strange Needler rounds detonated on the MJOLNIR suit's shields. The impacts would have killed anything but a SPARTAN or an Astartes, the Chief found himself admitting. A sustained burst of fire riddled the target Elite's body and it collapsed in a bloody heap.

There were now zero Elites. Chief took a deep breath as time seemed to return to its natural speed. He knew that there had to be precious little time remaining. The appearance of Cortana in one of the loading room's holoprojectors accented this fact.

"Inside your head, now!" Chief placed his hand on the projector and it glowed for a moment as Cortana transferred from the Cairo Station into John's armor. Under Cortana's not-so-gentle persuasion, the Spartan placed his hand on the bomb's dataport. There was a clicking sound followed by the strangest beep John had ever heard. The timer almost sounded disappointed that it had been stopped.

"Well, how'd we do?" John asked as he stared at the big blue ball of dirt filling the viewport.

Cortana's voice sounded tired. "You don't want to know."

Chief walked over to his shotgun. "What was that good news you mentioned earlier?"

"Athens secured the bomb right as you entered the chamber. The Imperium had the bright idea of teleporting it into a Covenant ship, but we missed our window by three point two seconds. Magos Micel wants to give it another go with the one you just disarmed."

John knew that if Cortana still had her avatar body, she would be grinning impishly. "I'd love to see the look on the split-jaws faces when that showed up." The room suddenly smelled of ozone and the Spartan turned just in time to see the bomb disappear in a misty white light.

"Any other good news?"

Cortana replicated the sound of a deep breath. "That Imperial Guard General Sturnn is moping up the last of the Covenant. We've got them trapped in a vice between Sturnn and Sgt. Johnson."

"Ouch."

Cortana's voice beamed. "Ouch indeed." John couldn't help but return the intentioned smile.

Regret's Flagship

The Prophet of Regret was in a fury. His troops had failed him utterly and completely. His fleet was in shambles. The newest human ships had ravaged the Covenant capital ships. As was expected, the standard UNSC vessels had been devastated by the superior technology of the Covenant. Despite an advantage in both numbers and technology, the pagan humans had repulsed the attacks on two of the three orbital stations.

"Shipmaster! Get us to the surface, **NOW!** Inform the surviving carriers to form up and follow to the surface. The Great Journey itself depends on us reaching the surface of this world!"

The Sangheli shipmaster pounded his clenched fist against his chest. "By your will, Hierarch."

Regret closed his eyes as he prayed to the Forerunners for guidance. His hope for a semi-quiet mediation was interrupted by shouts in the ancient Sangheli battle language. Regret opened his left eye and groaned. The Sangheli relished battle. At times he wondered if the clamor of battle, the din of war was the true god of the Elites. The High Prophet found that he doubted the faith of the foremost of the Covenant's warriors. Jiralhanae, now their faith could not be doubted. It pleased the San 'Shyuum that the Brutes were beginning to take a more active role in the Covenant. The berserker rages of the Jiralhanae could be troubling, but they were clearly motivated by deep faith. That deep faith made them easy to control. It was Regret's secret hope that one day, the Elites would be forced aside and that the Jiralhanae would take their place.

Regret's flagship accelerated with a grace that few ships could match and was soon joined in formation by two other Covenant carriers. Seraph attack craft raced ahead to escort the now disembarking Phantom Drop ship. The surviving Orbital MAC stations raged against the advancing Covenant ships. Regret's flagship was approaching from an advantageous vector. The crude, but effective human platforms could only focus their fury on the foremost ship of the wedge.

Magos Micel watched from the main hanger bay of the Cairo as the station and its surviving sister belched tungsten death at the approaching xenos vessels. The Adeptus Mechanicus techpriest prayed for the Deus Mechanicus to grant the stations the power to avenge their fallen sibling. He realized he was smiling again. Brafor had no illusions that his insistence on keeping his emotions were viewed by his associates as highly eccentric at best and dangerously heretical at worst. The fact that he had advanced as far as he did was astonishing. Micel harbored no illusions that he would ever advance beyond his current station. Nevertheless, he was just one of many cogs in the grand schematics of the Omnisiah and accepted his role.

Magos Micel activated his internal vox communications and relished the mechanical impulses that surged through his wet-brain. "Status of the package."

The hollow voice of a fellow techpriest rolled in the Magos' head. "It has arrived. The skull probe awaits only your command."

The techpriest of Mars crossed his arms. "Destroy those affronts to the Deus Mechanicus!"

Covenant Carrier _Womb of Fire_

Shipmaster T'son Raoh moved among his bridge crew. His voice carrying across the din of combat. T'son was extolling his men to uphold the Sangheli oath to defend the Covenant and lead the faithful on the Great Journey.

"Brothers! We must conâ€¦" The Shipmaster was interrupted by the

smell of ozone and a flash of light. A few feet in front of him was the bomb that he himself had armed to destroy the Orbital Stations. The sound of clinking metal drew his attention to the bomb. T'son's lower mandibles dropped in disgust as a tentacled human skull approached the data port. The eye sockets glowed like embers. Where the humans that desperate for survival to defile their dead like this? T'son growled and drew his sword. The skull placed a single tentacle over the dataport. The shipmaster's slash split the skull in half. He was a second too late. The bomb groaned as it revived itself. The eyes of the bridge crew turned to their shipmaster.

T'son pounded a clenched fist against his breast. "My brothers, I have failed you. It was the honor of my life to serve warriors of your devotion and character. I shall see you on the plains of the hereafter."

Elites stood in unison and returned the salute. "Honor and Duty."

T'son was filled with pride. "Each according to their station."

The _Womb of Fire _burned with the radiance of a sun for the briefest of moments.

Regret's Flagship

The proximity of the _Womb of Fire_'s death shook the crew of Regret's ship to the core. The Prophet could feel the burning desire for vengeance from each of the Sangheli. He had only seen the Sangheli like this a handful of times. Each time, they were impossible to control. _Damn them! Regret's mind screamed at their nature. Though he would deny it if pressed, Regret still harbored the racial memory of the long and brutal war between his people and the Sangheli. The San 'Shyuum were a patient race willing to take the long view. This stood in direct contrast to the passionate and shortsighted nature of the Sangheli. There was no doubt the Elites in Regret's fleet would be calling for a blood price for the loss of the _Womb of Fire_.

The Shipmaster maintained an outward professionalism, but Regret saw the inferno of hate that raged within him. "We are entering the atmosphere, noble Hierarch."

Regret interlocked his fingers. "Excellent."

The Prophet of Regret was never so glad to see the surface of a Human world.

High Charity

The world of Threshold reflected the light from its star brilliantly. Councilor N'gyven Dyr turned as the door to his chamber opened. A pair of Elite Major Domos flanked Oracle Master Yeur M'Saroo.

The elder Elite walked and stood beside the Councilor. "I have uncovered some evidence that there is heresy among some sections of the Covenant."

N'gyven dwarfed the Elder. His ceremonial headdress added to his

already considerable stature. "How deep does this run?"

Yeur twitched his mandibles. "It runs deep. My associates believe that there are numerous Prophets involved."

The Councilor turned his gaze from the gas giant. "Are there any Oath Breakers?"

Yeur shook his head. "Not that I have uncovered. However, I am troubled by the sect known as the Governors of Contrition. They view the accursed Parasite as a _gift_ of the Forerunners! Though they have not broken their oaths, I feel that they are a danger to all loyal Sangheli and to the Covenant."

Dyr heard the mummers of the two guards. He agreed with their assessment. It was madness. The Flood was not a gift. It was a cancer, a curse. All Sangheli should revile the Parasite, not exalt it. "Investigate these 'Governors', but take no action yet. I am more concerned about this new Heresy. What have you uncovered about it?"

"When my agents eliminated that Jiralhanae filth that murdered G'Vara they discovered a shrine. It was an Eight Pointed Star."

Silence reigned in the chambers of Councilor N'gyven. The mention of the Eight Pointed Star filled him with an unknown dread. It was like a splinter in his very soul. He did not know why, but a part of him screamed to destroy all connected to that cursed symbol.

"Yeur, I feel we are at the Twilight of this Age."

7. Chapter 7

High Charity

Eliphas the Inheritor, a Dark Apostle of the Blessed Lorgar, was not amused. The millenniums serving the True Gods of Chaos could not erase the hatred of xenos instilled in the Word Bearers Legion during their servitude to the False Emperor. If anything, the ages in the Warp had only heightened and intensified his hatred. Eliphas maintained a shadow of a memory of Colchis and the brutality of the holy war he waged against another distant and ancient Covenant. It was a distant memory, barely a mist. Thus, his current assignment was less than pleasant and had Eliphas been set loose, he would have slaughtered these pagan xenos for the Chaos Gods in an instant.

However, his desires would have to be held in check. The Legion required the assistance of these xenos for a little while longer. Oh, how he longed to rid himself of these inferiors and return to the blessed wars of faith or the holy flesh-halls of Sicarus. Eliphas knew that his own desires were meaningless as his orders came from the Daemon Primarch himself. Eliphas had endured the Long War with the deluded forces of the Corpse God and, by the Dark Pantheon, he would endure this.

The Prophet of Disdain poured over the sacred Epistles of Lorgar. All his life the Elder prophets had told him that if he focused on the texts of the Forerunners, the words would speak to him. Disdain had

only heard damning silence, but The Epistles of Lorgar, they _spoke_ and the chorus of voiced demanded attention. The Prophet was under strict orders from the Dark Apostle not to read from the book aloud. He finished the excerpt as the demi-god message bearer approached.

"You have questions, creature." The voice of the Apostle was unnaturally deep and powerful.

Disdain averted his eyes and kneeled before the great one. "Yes, holy one, I have a single humble question."

Eliphas reached into the wretch's mind and formulated an answer before the xenos had even considered asking the question. "Ask, but do not waste my time."

A sensation comparable to having a match lit in his head wracked the Prophet of Disdain. He struggled to ask the question in the presence of the Dark Apostle's psychic might. "The Epistles of Lorgar, they speak of a Great Crusade and the False Emperor's Betrayal. Have these events already happened or are they yet to come?"

The Dark Apostle seethed at the mention of how the False Emperor turned his back on the Legions and the Great Crusade. Eliphas never wanted to kill this creature more than right now, but once again, the command of the Holy Lorgar rang in his mind. "There is no simple answer. The Warp is mutable and the True and Very Real Gods are even now acting through Blessed Lorgar and the Word Bearers to prevent this sin."

Disdain kept his eyes averted. "Of course, Lord."

Eliphas' features became absolutely predatory. "Now, creature, what do you know about Halo?"

Cairo Station

General Sturnn stood aside as a fire-control team rushed past to continue the vital work of containing the battle damage the Orbital Station had taken during the battle. The moment that passed also gave him time to attempt to compose himself before entering the command bridge of the _Cairo_. The Imperial Guardsmen, Sturnn would always be simply a Guardsman in his mind, passed through the automatic doors. There was the unmistakable smell of incense and the smoky remnants of a Chaos Incursion. Father Brahae and the other Regimental Priests had immediately begun the purification of the station the moment the last xenos had fallen.

"The Covenant Super Carrier is holding position above New Mombassa and has deployed troops. Contact with all law enforcement and defense forces in the city has been lost."

Admiral Hood frowned. "Civilians?"

The lieutenant detailing the current situation looked dejectedly at the floor of the command center. "The Covenant is following its usual procedures."

Admiral Hood pounded the wall. "Damn it! Prepare to begin deploying marines into the city. We'll drop them in via Pelicans. I want the

troops ready to go in thirty minutes."

Sturnn looked at the map of Mombassa and concluded that Admiral Hood had no idea what he was talking about. "Admiral Hood, I mean no disrespect, but do you have any idea what you are doing?"

Admiral Hood glared at General Sturnn. "I'm trying to save millions of innocent lives, General. Time is of the essence and an aerial insertion is the best option."

General Sturnn's jaw clinched. "A mass aerial insertion into an urban environment will cost hundreds, maybe thousands of soldiers' lives. But, your plan has merit."

Major Goldman of the UNSC Marines took a step forward and cocked his head slightly. "What would you suggest then?"

Commissar Bostic matched the Major's advance. "General, if I may?" The Sturnn's nod was sharp and quick. "Major, if you were to land massive numbers of troops into the city they would be butchered by an entrenched enemy. Also, the xenos filth undoubtedly has anti-air weapons or fighter craft which would tear through your landing craft. Their deaths would be of far greater use than if you landed elsewhere."

"Their _deaths_ would be of far more use?" Major Goldman screamed and jabbed his finger directly at the commissar. Only General Sturnn saw Johan's hand reach instinctively for his laspistol. The animosity between the commissar and the UNSC Major was palpable.

"Gentlemen! This is not the time! Lord Admiral, with your permission, I wish to start landing the men of the 412th and the tanks of 5th Tygris Dragoons in this village here. I suggest that the Astartes, ODS and volunteers from your marines to land in the city to disrupt the Covenant forces so that we can punch through and save the city."

General Sturnn's voice rose over the bickering Commissar and Major. The other assembled officers, hoping to keep the schism between the UNSC and IoM from becoming much larger quickly shifted discussion to the merits of Sturnn's suggestions. As much as the UNSC and Imperium of Man's philosophies clashed, they were both still human and they had to stick together against their common foe.

New Mombasa

Yutob leered around the corner and sniffed the air. There was a foul stench permeating the air of this section of the city and something _else_. This horrible something was a splinter in the very core of his soul. Every fiber of his Uggnoy body screamed to run, to go somewhere far away from this human city. However, he could not run. His Elite handler, K'yorikee would not permit it. So, Yutob was forced to choose between certain death for retreating or the slim chance that if he continued forward he might just live. Two of the other Grunts bounded around the corner, seemingly as eager as Yutob to leave this dreadful city.

"Leader! There are humans over there. Sumtin' wrong with them thoughâ€¦!" The other Grunt craned his neck back towards the Sangheli. K'yorikee growled as he took a step forward.

"Well, how many are there?"

The Grunt looked at his appendages and counted off. "There be three."

"Even you Uggnoy can kill a mere three humans. We have been ordered to secure or destroy this healing facility so that the pagan humans cannot make use of it during their inevitable offensive. Yutob, take half the pack and kill those humans. The rest of you lot are with me. We have to make it to the healing facility."

Yutob nodded. "Gotcha, Leader. Come on guys, we have to be real sneaky like."

K'yorikee kicked one of the Grunts to get his detachment moving and marched off towards the human hospital. Yutob saw that some of the Grunts that had stayed behind look nervously towards the Sangheli Minor Domo. Yutob walked over to the others and stomped his foot.

"Come on, fellas! It's only three humans, we don't have anything to worry about."

There were numerous grumbles from the other four Grunts and they moved cautiously down the poorly-lit alley towards where the three humans were standing. Yutob's earlier fears of wrongness were back in full force. The humans all held strange melee weapons that seemingly glowed with a baleful, ethereal light in one hand. Yutob slinked over to the other Uggnoy. The other Grunts were straining to look over the rubble to catch a look at their targets.

Saat hunched low. "So, Yutob, what we do?"

Yutob sighed. "Ok, Saat, you go to down that alley and hide behind the waste tubs. Hitut and Midkup, you go hide over there. Vakrat, you stay with me. We open fire draw humans here, and the rest of you guys hit them when they aren't looking!"

Saat and the other Uggnoy sat in awed silence. Vakrat scratched his head and sighed deeply. "Wow, Yutob. That good plan. How did you think of it?"

"I watch Bosses. No more talking, move!" The lead Grunt didn't yell, but his voice was as firm as an Uggnoy could be. The others began to move when Hitut nudged a piece of debris. The slab of concrete fell to the ground and shattered. The humans wheeled around and saw the Grunts. Yutob had the sudden urge to shoot Hitut, but instead aimed his plasma pistol at the humans. Then he saw it. The humans' eyes were full of an unnatural madness. Yutob realized that this place was cursed. There could be no other explanation.

One of the humans pointed his ax at the Grunt's location. "Spill their blood and shatter their souls!"

The other two humans did not respond in words, instead they bellowed like frenzied animals and charged up the incline towards the Covenant troops. Yutob slapped Vakrat as the greenest of the Grunts attempted to flee. Plasma sang as it flew towards the charging humans. A glowing blotch of plasma impacted against the left shoulder of one of

the maddened humans. Saat's eyes widened as the human merely shrugged off the blast. Most of the pagans would have collapsed in pain after taking such a blow. Stunningly, the human merely continued his incessant chant of Maim-kill-burn. The unmistakable whizz of bullets joined the chorus of unholy chants from the trio of dark warriors. Midkup's head practically exploded as numerous slug rounds impacted against his skull.

"Rejoice in the coming Oblivion!" The lead human screamed as he tossed the empty pistol to the side.

Plasma fire was sporadic as fear began to grip the Uggnoy. What in the name of the Forerunners could cause humans to act like this? Even for faithless pagans, the Humans never before seemed to relish in the rush of battle like this. Once again, the wrongness of the situation called to Yutob. Saat screamed as he saw yet another plasma bolt sear the flesh of one of the humans and seemingly have no effect. The Uggnoy's mind snapped as he dropped his weapon and turned to flee. One of the humans leapt across the pile of debris with a deftness that the Grunts had never seen in their enemy. The shock of the human's new found agility was quickly overshadowed by the horrific appearance of the enemy. Humans were hideous in the best of circumstances, but these humans looked like escapees from hell. The enemy's eyes were the color of bronze and a pair of small horns were pushing through the human's forehead. Saat fell to the ground in a fit of incapacitating horror. There was a moment where the Grunts swore that they heard the ax of the enemy cry out in joy of being used. Blade met bone as the ax cleaved deep into Saat. All this was far too much for the small group of Covenant cannon fodder. All the survivors, except Yotub, dropped their weapons and fled in panic. One of the other human monstrosities brought his ax to bear on Vakatt. The Uggnoy's head was liberated from its body and rolled away. Yutob's arm quivered in fear and against the plasma over-charge. His comrades were being slaughtered and he was impotent in his attempts to help them.

"**Blood! Blood! Blood!**" One of the monstrosities repeated screamed as he hacked away at the bloody mess that used to be one of the Grunts, but Yutob couldn't recognize who it had once been. He poured his hate into his shot as he pulled the trigger and released the overcharged plasma.

The disciple of Khorne that was the former Michael Zander reveled in the slaughter of the Covenant Grunts. He raised his ax to the sky in adulation for his God, the Lord of Skulls. Zander was so consumed by his focus on spilling blood for Khorne that he didn't notice the humming orb of plasma streaking towards him. An inhuman shriek of pain shattered the sky. It took the disciples of Khorne a moment to realize that the pained exclamation did not come from one of their number. The scream had come from the ax. Rage consumed the Berserker as he set his gaze upon the pathetic creature that had dared to strike an instrument of the Blood God.

Yutob stumbled and fell on his back. The human's weapon continued to sound like a wounded beast to his ears. But in his soul, a dark and sinister voice spewing hexes and blasphemies at the Grunt. The small soldier struggled to his feet and backed away slowly and frantically pointed his plasma pistol at the approaching monsters.

"I will have your flayed skin as my standard you shriveling little

maggot!" The human wielder of the wounded weapon screamed. He hefted his weapon and began to charge. The ground shifted and gave way under Yutob's feet and he fell into the city's sewer system. The Grunt's wounded whimper was overshadowed by the wet _snap_ that betrayed his right arm shattering from the impact on the ancient concrete that he landed on. Ignoring the pain, Yutob rose to his feet and ran as fast as he could.

Zander bellowed like a frenzied animal and nearly leapt down after the creature when a hand was placed on his shoulder.

"Brother! There are worthier sacrifices. T'ythieul smells the souls of Sangheli near-by. Ignore the pest."

Zander wheeled around in a fury and emptied the clip of his pistol into the bloody remains of one of the other Grunts. The three Berserkers then rushed to cut a bloody swath into the Covenant.

Forerunner Gas Mine

The Phantom seemed to glide into position above the Arbiter. The graceful craft was slightly marred by the blackened wounds inflicted by Heretic anti-air fire. Fresh Sangheli warriors slid down the gravity shoot. Rtas 'Vadumee was at the head of the squad.

"Arbiter, you're still alive. I'm impressed."

"We have a new problem. There are more than just those creatures who attacked us earlier. There are two other strange warbeasts and worse."

There was a single still moment as realization dawned on Rtas. "The Parasite." The Spec-ops commander's reply was a sneer.

"Correct. We must hurry, time is of the essence."

There was no need for further conversation. The Elites knew their roles and the new dangers facing them. As the Sangheli advanced, the Arbiter noticed that the child-like cries that had scratched at the back of his head were slowly dieing off. The Arbiter was now certain that the other Elites could not perceive the calls. K'xon pushed the unnecessary thoughts from his mind and took up position near massive door that dominated the far side of the path.

"Commander, Arbiter. Sensors detect high levels of contacts." An Elite cautioned as he activated a second plasma rifle.

Rtas nodded. "Engage active camouflage. Arbiter, you have point." The assembled Sangheli shimmered for a moment as their concealment systems were brought online. Silence reigned in the complex as the Elites surged forward. The large chamber was seemingly empty. Despite the total absence of whatever created the sensor readings, the soldiers remained on guard. This tainted facility had already thrown the horrors of heresy, the Parasite and the unknown monstrosities at them. There was no telling what other abominable obstacles would try their faith and their martial talents next.

"T'kam and U'mei find a way to activate the lift. Everyone else be on guard for an ambush. Prepare for combat against the

Parasite."

Sangheli gathered into groups of three and trained their weapons on the numerous vents and ports lining the elevator shaft. The elevator was the perfect ambush site and Jiralhanae scouts had reported that several patrols had been lost ahead. The anti-air defenses surrounding this section of the facility were intense and despite the dangers the Sangheli had no choice but to make use of this elevator. The pained groans of ancient gears filled the chamber as the lift was activated. As the lift rose, the Sangheli became hyperaware of their surroundings. The question of an ambush was not if, but when and by who. The elevator rose steadily and a strange and uneasy silence reigned. A mechanical buzzing sound accompanied the bestial screech as the elevator stopped. The ancient Forerunner facility, upon its reactivation, began to carry out its function despite the gap of 100,000 years and the extinction of the facility's creators.

"Parasite Spores!" One of the soldiers bellowed as he drew his carbine to his shoulder. The Elites readied their weapons as the walls became a living tide of Flood Infection forms. Plasma fire and radioactive carbine bolts rained down upon the approaching spores. The fragile Infection forms practically shattered under the fire. Despite the numbers that fell to the Sangheli's fire, more kept coming.

The Arbiter smashed a leaping Infection form with his Plasma Rifle. As the creature shattered, K'xon managed to fire off a burst of shots at an advancing swarm. The plasma fire seared a small number of the Infection forms. A swarm of Infection Forms charged so quickly that the Arbiter and his small cadre could not hope to destroy them quickly enough. The onslaught of Infection forms ignited as they impacted the energy shields of the Sangheli. One of the Elites howled in pain as an Infection form burrowed into its chest to begin the horrifying process of transforming the warrior into a combat form.

"Stay back!" The Elite screamed, seemingly with two voices, as he activated a Holy Flare. The fungal growth of the Flood oozed across his body like oil on water. In his last act of freewill, the Elite roared and punched the plasma grenade into the cavity where the Infection form had entered.

The Arbiter instinctively shielded himself from the explosion. There was no time to reflect on the sacrifice or honor of the comrade who had just joined the Great Journey. Flood Combat forms leapt onto the rising industrial lift. The Parasites bellowed a feral cry and blindly charged at the nearest target. In an instant, the Flood was in the midst of the Elites and a bloody melee ensued.

Rtas 'Vadumee rolled away from a particularly violent strike. The hammer blow from the horribly corrupted Combat Form cracked one of the gas cylinders and the air became hazy. Plasma hissed as it carved through the outstretched appendage. Completely oblivious or simply unconcerned by the loss of its limb, the Flood backhanded Rtas. The Elite Special Operations Commander was sent flying and the plasma sword fell from his grip. His shields had buckled and he took the full brunt of the impact. Rtas staggered to his feet and aimed his plasma rifle.

The Arbiter eviscerated a Flood form and tossed the still writhing creature aside. K'xon dove behind the central pillar of the platform as a Combat form was firing wildly with a Brute Spiker. The Arbiter leaned around the obstruction and fired a burst of plasma at the abomination. The rancid smell of the Flood was amplified by the impact of the superheated plasma. K'xon continued to fire as the creature charged wildly. The rifle entered into an emergency heat vent due to the sustained fire. By miraculous intervention, the Flood form collapsed under the fire and skidded to a stop at the Arbiter's feet.

A ragged hiss escaped from somewhere on the Flood combat form as a barrage of plasma rifle fire. The pair of Sangheli continued to advance. Corpses littered the floor and every few steps, the Elites were forced to step over the battered remains of one of their comrades. It took dozens of shots, but the Combat form fell. Even in death, it attempted one last charge. By the Forerunner's blessing, the surging creature fell mere inches from the Sangheli.

And then there was silence.

The Sangheli had let out a mighty war cry after defeating the Genestealers. There was instead only a few haggard sighs of relief. Nearly two dozen Sangheli had boarded the lift. There were only four survivors. Rtas 'Vadumee tossed aside the depleted plasma rifle and stared at the honored dead.

"Damn the Parasite. Damn the Jiralhanae! Had those apes eliminated the air defenses like they were suppose to, we would have never lost so many of our brothers!"

The other two Sangheli survivors growled in agreement. Discord between the Elites and Brutes had been building for years. The Prophets had attempted to keep the brewing hate under control. It was failing. For all the San 'Shyuum's religious authority, they could not stop the smoldering conflict between the two warrior races.

Rtas 'Vadumee grunted in approval of the young warrior's declaration. Vadumee's distrust of the Jiralhanae was an open secret among the upper echelons of the Covenant.

The Arbiter stepped forward, more to push his own hate of the Brutes aside than to quiet his comrades. "We must continue on. Commander, how many reinforcements do we have left?"

"We have enough to complete our mission, Arbiter."

Sol System

Debris from the battle was constantly being captured by Earth's gravity and raining down on the cradle of mankind. The display was no doubt beautiful when viewed from the surface. There were no such sentiments among the survivors of the human defense fleet. Each piece of debris was a reminder of the heavy price paid to destroy the Covenant armada. The silent vow of Never Terra had been broken by the Prophet of Regret reaching the surface of Humanity's homeworld.

The vow would be repaired by the Prophet's death.

In Amber Clad glided into position near Cairo Station. Several other UNSC frigates had moored nearby and were awaiting orders. Miranda Keyes stared at the view screen that had suddenly switched to the image of Lord Hood and General Sturnn.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we're taking the fight to the surface. The atmospheric capabilities of our frigates make them ideally suited to escorting the Imperium's landing craft. _In Amber Clad_, Paris and Gorgon_ will be escorting the Adeptus Mechanicus _Navis Comillo_. All other ships are to provide close support for the Imperial Guard's landers." Lord Hood spoke, adrenaline overriding the fatigue evident on his face.

General Sturnn crossed his arms. There was something troubling him and he struggled not to show it to the UNSC ship commanders. "It is imperative that the _Navis Comillo_ reach the surface. We will need the might of the God-machines it carries if we are to purge the xenos taint from Terra. After the God-Machines are deployed, all ships not protecting the vessels of the Priesthood of Mars are to return to orbit and protect the Astropathic Choir currently residing on Honolulu Station."

Miranda Keyes, commander of the _In Amber Clad_, leaned forward in her command chair. "_God_-Machines and Astropathic _Choir_? What do you mean?"

General Sturnn grinned like a proud uncle. "Titans are war machines of incredible power. You will soon come to understand and _appreciate_ their might. Astropaths are equally vital. They are struggling and ****literally dying**** in their attempts to contact the Imperium. By the blessings of the Master of Mankind, we have had brief contact with the Blood Ravens."

The UNSC commanders exchanged incredulous murmurs before Lord Hood silenced them.

"Enough talk. You all have your orders. Good Luck commanders."

General Sturnn saluted. "The Emperor Protects."

The transmission ended and there was a momentary silence on the bridge of the _In Amber Clad_. After a heartbeat, the helmsman turned his head slightly.

"Commander, do you trust the Imperials?"

Miranda Keyes shifted in her chair. "No. Not yet. I will admit that their help was instrumental in crushing the Covenant here. Butâ€| but there is something unnerving about their religious furor."

The navigator made no attempt to hide his annoyance. "Too damn much like the Covenant for my taste."

Imperial Landing Craft Alpha-9701

Major Ramias Gath walked among the vehicles of his regiment. It took a moment for the Major to realize that he had laughed in dark humor at the thought. Barely half the regiment's Leman Russes and Hellhounds were combat ready. The fuel situation wasn't _that_ bad

and only because the Imperium had designed the Russ and Hellhound to run on anything that could combust.

Worse than the troubles with fuel were the ammunition and personnel problems.

The 5th Tygris Dragoons had been mauled by the Orks and the Blood Pact on Medusa V. Almost half of the soldiers in the Dragoons were dead. Their mortal remains utterly destroyed when the world was consumed by the Warp Storm. Colonel Varn had been killed by a lucky Grot bomb. The rest of the dead fell to the barbarity of the Green Tide or the madness of the Blood God's traitor army. Ammo was almost as rare as able bodied soldiers.

Now, the Tygris Dragoons were being deployed again. In any other circumstance, morale at the combat orders would have been practically nonexistent. This situation threw every normal consideration out the window. The world they were landing on was not some backwater hive or some agri world under attack by Eldar grasping at the delusions that the Galaxy was still theirs. This was the Holy of Holies. The 5th Tygris Dragoons were fighting for Terra. A holy fury was washing over the soldiers. Father Coyle, the surviving priest of the unit, was preaching a fiery sermon and blessing the fighting vehicles. Men were quickly stenciling litanies of hate on the barrels of their tanks. This was no holding action war. The Dragoons were preparing to wage a war of annihilation.

And it would be glorious.

Bamburi, Kenya, East Africa Protectorate

The rumble of UNSC vehicles drowned out the buzzing of the circling Pelican and Albatross dropships. It seemed as if the every Scorpion tank in Africa had been gathered in this one tiny village. The UNSC would need every vehicle and soldier to break the Covenant stranglehold on Mombasa. Word had reached the assembling UNSC troops that the Imperium was deploying troops to the surface.

Corporal Kale West leaned against a sandbag position and cleaned his S2 sniper rifle. His unit had been put on high alert the moment the Imperium's ships had arrived. The tension on the base had only risen as the Covenant launched its attack.

Hurry up and wait. Corporal West practically growled in disgust. This was Earth! They should have launched the attack as soon as Regret's ship entered the atmosphere.

"You seem annoyed Kal."

Kale turned his head rolled his eyes. "No shit, Hugh. Why are we waiting around?"

His spotter, Hugh Richards, shrugged his shoulders. "The fuck if I know. Heard something about those new guys bringing some troops down or something."

The sniper began to speak when the roar of engines drowned out all other sound. He gazed up to the skies and his mouth dropped in awe. Nearly a dozen Frigates were escorting numerous landing craft and a massive—| slab of metal. Strange, but obviously human, fighter

craft streaked over the assembled forces. The first of the large craft to land opened wide with an almost theatrical effort. A formation of tanks that appeared to be the love child of early tanks and the tanks of the pre-Covenant War era poured out of the landing craft. Kale noticed the battle scars on the vehicles were fresh. Did the Imperium view men as cogs? As mere numbers?

Then, Kale saw the men driving the vehicles. Pride and anger intermixed in their stance and features. There was no mistaking the resolve of these men. The UNSC sniper felt a wave of contradiction flow over him. What was the Imperium of Man? The soldiers obviously took pride in their duty even as their commanders tossed them around like dice.

Corporal West's introspection was bluntly interrupted by the landing of the largest of the Imperial vessels. Cathedrals. That was the first thought that entered the marine's mind at the sight of the ornate doors. The massive symbol of a half human, half machine skull encircled by a gear dominated the attentions of all who witnessed it. The grandeur of the vessel was self-evident. West honestly believed that the designers of the vessel had absolutely no sense of restraint.

Laughter was unavoidable at the ridiculousness of the next event. A pair of tiny doors opened and red robed priest marched out in unison. Kale couldn't help but be amused by the sheer contrast. The procession moved with mechanical perfection. Abruptly, the priests halted their procession and turned as a single unit towards the massive doors. For the briefest of moments, it appeared that the massive doors would strike the tiny figures gathered before the opening maw.

The portal came to a halt and a primordial god strode forth. The Earth herself trembled in awe at the titan's footfalls. No other word adequately captured the enormity of the construct emerging from its temple-craft. The left arm crackled with energy and seemingly roared a battle challenge to the universe. A massive pair of twin rotary cannons was its right arm. The titan was a force of nature in mechanical form.

Corporal Kale West stared at the gigantic war machine in mute horror. The force the Imperium had deployed was a battered collection of soldiers. If this was a battered force what was the true nature of the Imperium's military?

8. Chapter 8

New Mombasa

"The message just loops: _Regret, Regret, Regret_."

Cortana's voice sounded distracted and reminded some of the strike force of the most horrifying of battlefield situations: a junior officer looking at a map. The soldiers inside the Pelicans and Thunderhawk racing through the man-made caverns of New Mombasa keep silent despite the worry that flashed in their minds.

"And? What does it mean, Cortana?" Miranda Keyes chimed in from the _In Amber Clad_ which had been ordered to remain on station to

provide heavy aerial support and as a secure communications hub.

Sergeant Avery Johnson co-opted Cortana's response by entering the cockpit of his Pelican and opening an open channel. "Dear Humanity: We regret coming to Earth. We regret being alien scum and we most certainly regret that the Corps and the Guard blew up our entire god damned fleet!"

A chorus of cheers erupted throughout the city and vehicles of the assembled human forces. UNSC Marines whooped their traditional 'Hoo-rah!' while Guardsmen shouted their regimental war cry. Even the normally stoic Imperial Fists allowed themselves a moment of amusement at the Sergeant's sarcastic little speech.

Cortana made a sound mimicking the clearing of a throat. "It's a name, the name of one of the Covenant's Prophets. One of the highest ranking Prophet's at that."

A hush fell over all who heard that pronouncement. Lord Hood's voice was the first to find itself. "Master Chief and the Astartes, we need to you get aboard that carrier. Of all the places on Earth he came here. Regret didn't hit Geneva, New York or Beijing. You are going to capture him and he is going to tell us why. And after that, we will have some measure of justice."

John nodded and behind the reflective visor of his helmet he smiled. The thought of capturing and bringing a Prophet to answer for the Covenant's crime was satisfying. "Understood."

"By His Will." The connection to the Astartes Thunderhawk was suddenly silent as the Astartes honed their minds and souls for the task in front of them. In a gesture unseen by all but the Astartes themselves, the super soldiers knelt in prayer.

Forerunner Gas Mine

The explosion of a plasma grenade punctuated yet another Heretic attack. This section of the facility was firmly under control of the Oath-Breakers. The Arbiter fired a burst of plasma into a charging renegade Sangheli. A howl of pain erupted as the warrior collapsed and the smell of burnt flesh filled the chamber. The Arbiter approached a wounded enemy Sangheli struggling to prop himself up.

"Where is your leader?"

The Sangheli looked directly at the Holy armor of the Arbiter. "He is elsewhere. You will not reach him alive."

The painful obviousness of the apostate warrior's denial found its way to the Arbiter's face. "I am already dead, heretic. Answer truthfully. Where is the arch-heretic?"

A weak, gurgling laugh escaped from the dying Sangheli. "Iâ€¦ I suppose you are correct Arbiter. Sesa 'Refum is deeper within the facility. We will resist you until the end, but we would rather die in honorable battle against Sangheli than in an ignoble brawl with the barbarian Jiralhanae, have the Prophets lead us to slaughter or fall prey to the Dark."

Rtas took an angry step forward and activated his plasma sword.
"Cease your blasphemies."

The Arbiter placed a calming hand on his comrade's shoulder. "What do you speak of?"

The Heretic Lieutenant looked up. "A tale which I can not finish. My time has ended, Arbiter. Fight and Die well."

Life fled the dying Sangheli. The Covenant Strike Force crossed the arms of the warrior. He may have been a heretic, but he had fought and died well. That had earned him the right to some dignity in death. In that moment, K'xon Rtau had a moment of unnatural clarity.

His perception raced among the facility. He felt and heard the hum of the station's plasma generator as it operated. He recoiled slightly at the horrific smell of the Parasite and at the acidic taste of leaking gas from a containment conduit. Then he experienced something that he recognized immediately as unholy. It was something that could compare to the magnitude of the threat of the Parasite. This taint, for there was no other word that accurately captured the foul experience, revolted him physically and caused his very soul to recoil in disgust. It was the laughing of thirsting gods. As his unnatural perception fled from the taint, he found his ultimate quarry. The Arch-heretic, Sesa 'Refum, was nearing a hanger.

"This place has been corrupted. I will intercept Refum. Commander Rtas 'Vadumee, take your Brothers and return to the safety of the Phantoms."

Rtas looked away from his private conference with two of the other Elites. "Of course this place is corrupted. Heresy has taken root and the Parasite has ravaged us and the Oath-breakers."

The Arbiter looked into the distance, trying to summon back his Farsight. "It is more than that, Brother. This corruption is far moreâ€¦" He struggled for a moment to find the right word.
"Insidious"

Covenant Position outside New Mombasa

Grunts whimpered and dove for cover. The fires of combat had descended upon them. Their boss, the Sangheli T'kar Falonee, stared directly at the face of his most hated enemy. The Jiralhanae Captain merely returned the venomous stare.

"Major Domo Falonee. The Blessed Prophet of Regret wishes for an update on the fortifications and the location of Field Master Daras 'Kihree." The voice was filled with barely simmering hate.

"You may inform the holy Prophet that we are ready to meet the enemy in glorious combat. The honorable Field Master is ensuring that all _Front Line_ forces are prepared."

T'kar's verbal snub did not go unnoticed. The Jiralhanae trembled with rage at the insult. Falonee's omission of Captain Rasilus's name was a completely unsubtle admission that the Elite considered the Jiralhanae unworthy. The assembled Grunts cowered even deeper into

their cover. However, a low droning crooning escaped from the Kig-yar. The mercenary warriors were trying to build the bloodlust of the two commanders. It was their hope to witness a suitably bloody fight. All this waiting for the cowardly humans to attack was quickly growing boring. A good fight would certainly liven things up a bit.

"I will inform the glorious Prophet of Regret of your progress when I personally speak with him."

Without a further word, Rasilus turned and began walking to his vehicle when an unnaturally loud whistling filled the air. Suddenly, the Prowler detonated. Viscera, shrapnel and other debris were thrown into assembled Covenant troops. Rasilus was thrown into a trench and rolled over to see the tattered remains of one of the Kig-yar slide into the crevice. The whistling continued as Rasilus finally realized what was happening. It was a bombardment. The humans were using long range artillery on the entire battle line. He had been on Harvest when this Holy War had been born. Even then, when the resources of the humans were not tattered and depleted, the UNSC had not used artillery this extensively.

Great flowers of flame blossomed for as far as the eye could see. The screams of Covenant Warriors sounded muffled behind the ringing of Rasilus's ears. He clamored to the lip of the trench and looked out across the empty expanse. It was no longer empty. In the distance, a monstrosity of metal that dwarfed even a Scarab strode forth. Rasilus barely had time to utter a prayer to the Forerunners before a flash of light engulfed him.

Bamburi Highway

A hushed silence fell over Corporal Kale and the rest of his squad as they witnessed the destructive power of the Titan. The single blast of its energy weapon had vaporized a Covenant Strongpoint that would have taken a full barrage of an entire company of Scorpions. Equally as horrific was the sound. The shriek had drowned out the engines of hundreds of Warthogs, Imperial APCs and the combined roars of the assembled tanks.

Private Connor gaped at the carnage unleashed by a single blast of the Titan's cannon. "Holy hell! Did you see that?! Did you see that!"

David Grayson, the squad's sergeant nodded. "We saw it Con. I just hope that artillery barrage put a dent in the Covenant lines. That thing can't vape every Covie position."

Kale checked the magazine in his M6 and shrugged his shoulders. "It's just nice to have an unstoppable energy weapon on our side for once."

Grayson smiled as he raised his binoculars to eyes as he saw Grunts fleeing from the incoming artillery from human lines. "Stow it. We'll be hitting the Covenant in three. Look sharp."

A booming laugh erupted from Private Richards as he pointed to his left. "Do you want us that excited sir?"

Every head turned and strained to see what the Sniper's spotter was

looking at. Imperial Leman Russ tanks rushed past the squad's Warthog Transport. An officer wearing a dark greatcoat with a brilliant crimson sash was shouting something as he waved an ornate saber over his head.

Connor pulled a knife and mimicked the action. "DRIVE ME CLOSER! I WANT TO HIT THEM WITH MY SWORD!"

New Mombasa

"Helo-23, Grid is hot. I say again, grid is hot. Recommend alternative LZ."

Sgt. Avery Johnson took a drag on his ever present cigar as he mulled the words of the spotters. A small patch of UNSC and East African Protectorate troopers had holed up in a radio station. They had been providing valuable information on enemy troop movement. Most disturbingly, the Covenant wasn't the only enemy the survivors had reported on. There had been numerous attacks on the survivors' position by blood maddened humans.

Brother-Captain Thomas had spat the identity of the enemy as if it was poison. "Chaos."

That single word had chilled the assembled soldiers to their very core. The UNSC had only a single limited encounter with the spawn of the Immaterium and that encounter was one too many.

One of the pilots looked up at the sergeant. "Sir, it's your call."

Sgt. Johnson nodded and turned to the rear of the Pelican. "Get Tactical Marines!"

Master Chief grinned behind his helmet as he snapped a fresh magazine into his Battle Rifle. Cortana was silent, no doubt hacking into the Covenant Battle-net to give the UNSC and Imperials every advantage she could offer.

"Ahâ€¦ Shit." One of the pilots muttered a curse as a stalking mechanical spider rounded a corner and opened fire on the advancing flotilla of human transports. John had slipped into his pre-battle detachment and merely grimaced as a torrent of plasma tore huge gouts out of one of the rear Pelicans. Flame erupted from the engines as it fell from the sky. A shrill whine that sounded like a mockery of a deep breath overwhelmed the roar of the engines. The front of the Covenant Scarab walker expelled a searing blast of plasma at the onrushing aircraft. Two of the Pelicans took glancing hits from the Scarab's gun and lost control.

John grabbed a young marine that was nearly thrown from the spiraling Pelican. Prayers, screams and shouted commands filled the compartment as the left wing was sheared away. The young marine had the presence of mind to strap into his crash seat before an unnaturally loud crunch caused John's entire world to go black.

Covenant CPV-Heavy Destroyer Adulation

The Prophet of Disdain bowed low as a Word Bearer entered the doorway. The Chaos Space marine carried an incredibly large banner in

the shape of the sacred Eight-Pointed Star. The assembled Covenant Apostates exclaimed among themselves the power of their new gods. Excitement and a profound sense of impressiveness were palpable among the collection of aliens.

Standard Bearer Ramaius did not share the enthusiasm of the latest converts to the Word. The Xenos were bowing and cooing like slaves fearing the blow of their master. Which Ramaius had to admit, was possibly the wisest course of action they could take. The annoyance he felt at such weakness did not diminish in the slightest, however.

"Praise be to the Dark Gods! Praise be to Holy Lorgar! Praise be to Dark Apostle Eliphas!"

The Standard Bearer Ramaius bellowed as Eliphas the Inheritor and his Cabal entered the bridge of the Covenant vessel. The Sorcerer Kentarus shuddered as a wave of blessed Warp Energy coursed through his body. First Acolyte Iulianus stood at his master's right side. The Coryphaus stood at rigid attention.

Eliphas the Inheritor growled as he strode forward. "Glory to Chaos! Disdain, get his vessel underway. You are not to deviate from the course I, Kentarus and Iulianus decree. All our orders are from the Gods themselves. **Do you understand?*"

Disdain bowed lower. "Of course, my lord." The San 'Shyuum turned to the helmsman. "Prepare to enter Slipspace!"

The helmsman acknowledged the order, fear dripping from his voice. The nearness of the Word Bearers gnawed away at his sanity. Coryphaus Aeolus Crius approached the helmsman's position and his gaze bored into the head of the Brute piloting the Heavy Destroyer.

"Do you have doubts, my Coryphaus?" Eliphas' voice was as deep as the Warp itself. Aeolus turned around with surprising grace in his massive suit of Terminator armor.

"Of course not, my Apostle. The Dark Gods will see us to our destination. I am merely acquainting myself with this vessel."

Eliphas did not move from his position at the apex of the Ritual's rune. "As vigilant as always. Do not trouble yourself, our arrival will be soon."

The Dark Apostle began chanting a prayer to the Chaos Gods. Iulianus and Kentarus immediately joined their master in the prayers. Reality began to writhe at the center of the Rune. One of the lesser San 'Shyuum collapsed into a heap, blood seeping from his eyes and ears. Disdain was knocked from his feet as the methane tank of one of the Uggnoy detonated. The Flames were drawn into the vortex forming between the three Chaos Space Marines. Disdain's mind roared for him to avert his eyes from the Dark Ritual. A second rebellious voice goaded Disdain to gaze upon the unnatural beauty of the Warp Vortex. His will became fractured, but it held. Screams filled the bridge as the souls of those who foolishly looked upon the incantation were ripped from their bodies. Eliphas' chanting grew louder and more unnatural with each passing second. Then, it suddenly stopped.

The Prophet of Disdain quaked with fear and felt the dampness of the deck and smelled the stench of the room. _I must have soiled myself_ was his first thought. Then, as he dared to open his eyes, he witnessed the truth. The deck had become _flesh_. Disdain sprang to his feet and took in the horror of what the ritual had accomplished.

Magnificent isn't it, creature? Gaze upon the machinations of the Dark Gods. Cast aside all you knew, all you were. Chaos has claimed you! Chaos has you! Chaos!

The walls and floors of the bridge had become as flesh and pulsed as a blood-like fluid flowed through translucent veins. Occasionally, faces would appear in the walls and scream in ecstatic pain. Vomit threatened to surge forth as he gazed upon what had once been Garus, the Brute pilot of the _Adulation_. The Jiralhanae had been partially absorbed by his pilot throne. His back and lower body had completely merged with the chair and pus seeped from open wounds where the fusion had not been as thorough. The throne was no longer bolted to the floor, but instead rested on eight insect-like legs.

Aeolus sighed with obvious relief. "Glorious work my Apostle! This place is now consecrated in the image of the Holy Sicarus!"

Eliphas panted from the exertion. "Of course my work is glorious, Aeolus!" The Apostle rose to his feet and nodded. "We should be arriving at Halo soon."

Disdain reeled from the shock. How could they be arriving at one of the Sacred Rings? The _Adulation_ had only just entered Slipspace moments before. As the Prophet swayed, the deep grating laugh of Kentarus filled the chamber.

"Ah_ seems that_ our Xenos _friend_ does not_ understand_"

"I_ have much to learn_" Disdain's voice sounded weak and hollow in his ears. Only the Gravity Belt he wore allowed him to remain standing.

Iulianus growled. "At least he knows his place. This vessel has been in Slipspace for nearly a dozen hours."

Disdain vomited. The disgorgement was literally lapped up by an eager and mutated face that had sprung from the pulsating deck. The power of the Gods was overwhelming. In all his years, he had never been in the presence of such might. "All_ praises to Chaos_"

The Word Bearers shouted in unison. "***All Praises!***"

Eliphas pointed his Manreaper at the Forerunner installation that occupied one of the Lagrange points of a lone crimson Gas Giant. "Thus spake Lorgar: The fawning slave shalt carry forth the Faithful to the Torch of the Ancient Dead and to the Sphere of Blood."

The Word Bearers bowed low at the mention of the Daemon Primarch. "Gloria ut Immaterium!"

Ravenous Spirit, Segmentum Ultima, Eastern Fringe

Epistolary Rawiya strolled through the corridors of the Ravenous Spirit. His Force Staff was rhythmically resounding off the deck allowing him to slip deeper into thought. Battle-Brothers nodded in acknowledgement as he passed. Rawiya touched his right hand to his chest to return the gesture. The entry to the Sanctum Centurios loomed in front of him. The Space Marine Librarian allowed a swell of pride to fill his breast as he stared at his Chapter's proud emblem. A Raven with its wings spread in flight with a tear of blood at its center dominated the large bronze doors. The Epistolary pushed the massive doors open and entered the private chambers of his Company's captain.

The Captain of the Blood Raven's Third Company, Gabriel Angelos, smiled as the Librarian entered. The Captain's guest rose to his feet and inclined his head as a greeting. Rawiya bowed as he made the sign of the Aquila.

"Brother-Captain Angelos, Chapter Master Khaba. I have received an Astropathic message from Brother-Captain Warin Thomas of the Imperial Fists and the missing Grand Cruiser Palma. The contents of the message are difficult to believe."

Khaba crossed his arms. "Have you verified the contents of the message, Epistolary?"

Rawiya nodded. "Of course, my Lord. I have relayed the message to Chief Librarian Nayarit aboard the Omnis Arcanum. The Astropathic message has been confirmed as genuine. He has personally sent the message and his belief in its veracity to Kar Duniash."

Gabriel motioned towards Librarian. "May we see the contents of the message?"

The Librarian handed a copy of the message to the Blood Ravens' Captain and to the Chapter Master of the Celestial Lions. The two Space Marine heroes shot a stunned glance at each other. Nearly an hour passed as the two commanders read and reread the message. Chapter Master Khaba rerolled the scroll and bowed to Gabriel and Rawiya.

"I will return to the Leonidas. The Celestial Lions will depart at once. Once more, my Chapter thanks you, Blood Ravens, for aiding in the reclamation of our Geneseed on Armageddon. The Celestial Lions have a future again."

Bearded Khaba strode from the Sanctum Centurios and hurried to return to the remnants of his once proud chapter. There was a moment of quiet as Captain Angelos gazed upon Godsplitter.

"Have we received orders from our Chapter Master, Rawiya?"

The Epistolary nodded ever so slightly. "Aye, Brother-Captain. He requests that we answer the request for aid. He invoked the Imperial Fists' relief of our 2nd Company on Galeria in M38."

Gabriel Angelos ran his hand along the scroll containing the message. "Contact both the Omnis Arcanum and Kar Duniash. Inform them that we are accompanying the Celestial Lions to reinforce Captain Thomas. We depart for this Anomaly as soon as the message is sent. May the Emperor guide us."

His orders received, Rawiya bowed and departed. The Librarian found himself in disbelief at the message even as warriors far wiser and more honorable than he accepted it. The Blood Ravens were to depart and would lend their aid to the defense of _Earth_.

9. Chapter 9

Pegasi Delta, July 3, 2545

Tom collapsed from the twin weights of exhaustion and despair. The Black Cat stealth craft that was meant to take them to safety was a burning wreck. Debris from the destruction of the Covenant capital ships had destroyed the only ship anywhere near to their current position. As he surveyed the ruins, Tom felt Lucy grip his hand.

"We have to look for survivorsâ€¦ There has to be some others left alive. We'll find them as we head to the other Black Cat."

Tom frowned at his friend and the only other survivor of Beta Company. "You saw what happened. There couldn't be anyone left alive after that."

Lucy withdrew her hand. "How are you even sure _we_ are alive?"

Lucy's words struck Tom like a slap to the face. He _knew_ that they were alive, but what he couldn't answer was the _why_.

Why indeed? The words were spoken by what seemed to be over a thousand voices. Each voice was using a different combination of inflection and tone, some were fatherly, others mocking and some dripping with madness. It took Tom a moment to realize that Lucy had heard the voices as well.

"Do you hear the voices too?" Lucy's voice was strangely calm despite all that had happened.

"I heard them, Lucy. Come on. We have to live. I feelâ€¦ No, I _know_ that we are to play a part in some greater plan."

Lucy smiled and to Tom's surprise, he glimpsed into her mind and realized that she didn't care any more about the other Spartans. Tom chuckled as he realized that he didn't care either.

The pair turned as a menacing growl came from the direction of the burning Black Cat. A single Sangheli was hobbling from a destroyed Orbital Insertion Coffin. His left arm was horribly burned and broken, but his right hand clutched a fearsome Plasma Sword. Tom slightly recoiled as he felt Lucy touch his thoughts. It wasn't that the experience was unpleasant, far from it. It was just that the mental caress was unexpected.

I believe that the situation is now complicated.

Tom returned the sentiment. _It wasn't before?_

The Spartan heard his comrade laugh. It wasn't in his mind, but a physical sound. How he could tell the difference so soon after

discovering his abilities was beyond him. For now.

It was, but this changes things. What should we do?

Tom mulled the thought as the wounded Elite pushed himself away from the debris he was using to support his battered frame.

Let's burn him. Burn his body and mind like his filth burned our homes and everything we once cared for.

Lucy grinned broadly and Tom cackled as he watched confusion wash over the pain on the alien's face. The pair clasped their hands together and focused on the pain and suffering they longed to inflict on their hated foe. The air shimmered as eldritch energies coursed around the forms of the children. Wave upon wave of blasphemous power impacted upon the already wounded Sangheli. The screams of the burning alien were the sweetest music the pair had ever heard.

A loud metallic clapping rolled around them like thunder. Tom and Lucy wheeled around and gazed upon the giants that had seemingly materialized around them. The clapping giant wore a massive suit of gold-trimmed dark blue armor. He, Tom wasn't sure how he knew that the giant was male but he knew, also had a ornate finned headdress. An absolutely massive long-handled bladed weapon rested between his arm and torso and at his hip hung a pistol that looked more like a squad automatic weapon to the children. Three other giants stood to each side of their master, weapons at the ready, wearing similar armor and headdresses that were ornate but none as grand as their leader.

"Beautiful. I should have suspected no less from those who survived the Architect of Fate's test." He nodded in Lucy's direction. "Your gender poses a problem, my dear, but your psychic might more than makes up for that."

Lucy bristled at the slight. Tom knew that Lucy hated being called 'just a girl', not as much as she hated the Covenant but still a great deal. The creature's abnormally deep voice transitioned into a booming laughter.

"Such magnificent hate. Oh, I will enjoy helping you scheme and plot your revenge and the destruction of the Covenant."

Tom took a step closer. "How can you help us? We are Spartans, we can kill Covenant already?"

The booming laughter continued. "True, but can you destroy them? Can your _Spartan_ training reduce the object of your glorious hate to dust?"

The other giants spoke for the first time. Their voice a harsh whisper that was entirely too loud for their tone. "All is Dust!"

Lucy smiled and Tom sensed her desire to control such power. She took a step forward. "How can you do this?"

Tom nodded. His thoughts were linked with hers.

The giant knelt down and placed a massive hand on her shoulder. His

hand nearly covered her entire upper body and even kneeling on one knee, he was taller than she was. "I will teach you to harness the power of Tzeentch! You my dear will be a mighty sorceress. Regiments of enemies will burn with just a whisper of your power."

The giant rose to his feet and turned his attention to Tom. "And you.. I will transform you from a Spartan.."

Tom waited with baited breath for the giant to finish his proclamation.

"To an Astartes."

Old Mombasa behind Covenant Battle Lines, Modern Day

John felt his body sway as he tried to steady himself. Considering he was on his hands and knees, this was a problem. He shook his head as he heard a rather annoying tapping on his visor. The Spartan knew that the tapping was Cortana's doing. The sound was entirely too clear to be from outside his helmet.

"I'm ok, Cortana." Chief steadied his voice and rose to his feet as he heard Sergeant Johnson shout _'Go, go, go!' _to his marines.

Cortana mimicked a nervous chuckle. "Well, maybe next time you'll use a seatbelt."

John realized he was no longer annoyed by Cortana's concern. When he had first met the AI on the _Pillar of Autumn_, John was not thrilled with having the AI tag along. The events of Halo and the subsequent battles against the Covenant had forged a bond between the Spartan and the AI. Cortana was as close to John as any living human.

"What I miss while I was out?"

"Not much, but could you please find some cover?"

John nodded and sprinted for a small building where some UNSC marines and a handful of Imperial Guardsmen were gathered. Spartan-117 smiled behind his polarized visor at the sight of the Imperial Guardsmen carrying what he remembered Brother-Captain Thomas describe as a Melta. At least Covenant Armor or Hunter pairs wouldn't be too much of a problem.

Sergeant Johnson nodded at his comrade-in-arms. "You want point Chief?"

The other soldiers looked up at the super-soldier. John felt their gaze upon him. He had gotten used to being viewed as an outcast or a figure of awe.

"Yes sir."

Master Chief rounded the corner and reached the next archway far faster and with far more grace than a soldier encased in a half ton of powered armor should manage. A gaggle of Grunts was congregating. They were whispering amongst themselves and only occasionally casting fearful glances at their surroundings.

Good, they should be afraid. John brought his Battle Rifle to his shoulder and peered through the scope. The slight pressure on the trigger sends three rounds into the central Grunt. The alien collapses in a heap. It's head reduced to a bloody stump. One of the other Uggnoy wheeled around just in time for a burst of fire from Avery's assault rifle to tear a viscous wound into its torso. The other Grunts wasted no time in breaking and fleeing. A blast from one of the Imperial Guardsmen managed to detonate one of the Grunt's methane tanks. In the course of under a minute, the humans had killed nearly a dozen Grunts.

"Well, the squiddies sure as hell know we're here. Secure the roof and prepare for Covie attacks."

The Elite controlling the Covenant troops in the area charged the collection of human soldiers brandishing his plasma rifle like a melee weapon. He was promptly engulfed in a gout of fire from one of the Guardsmen's flamethrowers. John put a burst of rifle fire into the alien's skull to silence its screaming. The Spartan saw the shocked glances some of the UNSC marines flashed each other at the brutality of the Imperium's flamer. The mechanism of the flamer resembled the legendary Greek Fire. It was easy to believe that the fires feasting on the Elite would never extinguish.

The humans reached the roof and immediately began taking up positions. A pair of Imperial Guardsmen were setting up a very large weapon. Cortana mumbled something about it resembling a recoilless anti-tank rifle. John realized that he was again impressed. Whatever one thought of the culture of the Imperium of Man, they surely didn't mess around when it came to equipping their troops to kill their enemies.

One of the Guardsmen turned towards the UNSC Marines.
"Sergeant?"

Sergeant Johnson strolled over to the young Imperials, confidence washing over him like water off a duck's back. "Report soldier."

The soldiers saluted sharply. Chief saw Avery flash him a quick grin. Despite being from another galaxy and another time, the two veterans recognized a green trooper when they saw one.

"Sir, the Autocannon is set up. What can we expect, sir?"

Avery smirked. "A _whole_ lot of ugly."

Forerunner Gas Mine

Djakarta appraised the Flood Infection Form writhing in his diseased arm. It was magnificent in its simplicity. Ator walked up behind his brother.

"Marvelous. How are we going to get this sample to Papa Nurgle?"

A jovial voice filled the room and a blessed pestilence filled the air. "That, mah boi, is the question isn't it?"

The pair of Jiralhanae smiled like juveniles fresh from the crÃ"che. A great, swollen blob of rotting flesh covered in filthy pustules stood leaking foul puss and corrupted blood. A massive rusting sword

was clenched in one fist, and a long, disgusting tongue lolled from the side of its mouth as it spoke. The Greater Daemon of Nurgle waddled closer to his 'nephews' as tiny Nurglings danced at its feet.

A Nurgling scampered up to Ator and started tugging at the tattered clothing of the Brute. The disease ravaged warrior patted the minor daemon on the head. Djakarta smiled at the camaraderie before turning his attention back to the facsimile of Nurgle.

"What does the Father of Decay require of us?"

The Great Unclean One's shoulders twitched as it laughed. "Mah boi, our Grandfather doesn't require anything but your love. He would like for you to spread his gifts." He reached out a decaying arm and handed Djakarta an organic-looking dataslate. "This world, is crying out for aid against the uncaring Sangheli and the fool 'Prophets'. Papi needs you to shelter these lost children. There should be a long range craft just down tha wai."

Djakarta smiled, blood seeping from the infected gums in his mouth. "I'll be happy toâ€¦"

The Great Unclean One's eyes went wide. "I'm sorry Mah boi! I forgot to give ya mah name. Call me Nebnua Uymbi."

Djakarta extended his hand to Nebnua. The jovial daemon took it and shook. The flesh touched by the Daemon seeped with toxins. "We will depart at once. Ator, we need to go."

Ator nodded and waved to the Nurglings he had been playing with. Djakarta handed over the Infection Form to Nebnua Uymbi. The Daemon looked at the two departing figures with a paternal pride as he tossed the squirming Infection form into the Warp Rift behind him. "I have a good feeling about those two."

Deep within the facility, the Arbiter collapsed as a searing pain assaulted his mind. Something foul had breached reality and its proximity was tearing apart his very soul. It seemed that only his hate and disgust for the miasma in his consciousness kept him from being driven irredeemably mad. He roared against the pain and rose to his feet. The hanger where the Arch Heretic was attempting to flee was mere meters in front of him. K'xon Rtau had come too far to fall victim to some unseen enemy. The chamber was surprisingly well lit and open. Sesa Refumee stood on top of a Seraph fighter and nodded as the Arbiter entered the chamber.

"So it ends."

Outskirts of Old Mombasa

Private Conner leapt out of the Warthog and rushed for the nearest cover position. Hugh and Kale had stalked off to get into an ideal sniping spot. Connor took a deep breath to calm himself and peered over the pile of debris he was behind. Immediately, a flurry of Covenant Plasma shots hit all around him. The shots were green in color so it meant it was one of the annoying little ones. He caught sight of a pair of Jackals marching forward with their shields interlocked.

"I hate aliens." Connor growled to himself as he returned fire.

"As you should soldier!"

A harsh voice practically roared behind him. The UNSC private turned and took a double take as he recognized the figure. It was the Sword Guy. The officer was wearing a black greatcoat A red sash hung around his shoulders. Connor recognized his saber right away. It was even more impressive up close and was surrounded by a strange haze.

"Nice sword. Killed anything with it yet?"

The Commissar's jaw dropped. He had never had a soldier address him so directly. Despite his shock, he still had the presence of mind to fire a blast from his laspistol into an advancing Grunt. The small alien cried out as it fell.

"No. Who are you soldier to speak to an Commissar so?"

Conner turned his attention away from the Commissar for a moment as he fired a wild burst into a pack of Grunts. "Private Jeffery Connor sir."

The first instinct of the Commissar was to shoot this Private Connor for insubordination, but he suddenly remembered that the Departmento Munitorium didn't have any jurisdiction over the UNSC. _Yet_. The Commissar overrode that instinct and instead motioned for the guardsmen in the squad he was attached to. A grizzled veteran carrying a glowing plasma gun rushed forward.

"Yes, Commissar Halvorsen?"

"Guardsmen Sawir, do you see that xenos redoubt?"

The Commissar motioned with his laspistol towards a Covenant antigrav tower. Halvorsen fired a pair of shots into an Uggnoy. The advancing Grunt pack broke and fled as the combined fire from Connor and the Commissar thinned their numbers.

Sawir strained to size up his target. Connor was shocked that he didn't even blink as a Needler shot exploded to his left. "I'll need to get closer."

Connor rolled over. "Hold that thought."

The UNSC trooper motioned for Sergeant Grayson. Grayson knelt beside the assembled troopers and nodded at the Commissar.

"Report Connor."

"Sir, I believe the Imperium's soldiers want a tour of Mombasa."

Grayson snarled as he joined in the volley of fire directed at the Covenant warriors cowering in the craters born of the artillery barrage. "Where would our honored guests like the tour to start?"

The Commissar took cover as a Covenant Plasma Cannon raked their position. Halvorsen was a veteran of nearly a dozen campaigns in his

career and had developed a veteran soldier's ability to find exactly where the bastards trying to kill you were hiding. "That small facility at 11 o'clock would be a nice place to start."

Grayson nodded as he reloaded. "That's a nice little spot. We need to take out that Plasma Cannon and those snipers though. Got anything that can take it?"

Sawir patted the underside of his Plasma Gun. "Oh, I think we can manage."

The rest of Grayson's squad and the Guardsmen Commissar Halvorsen was commanding rushed to the position. The Commissar and Grayson traded a glance that harbored the unspoken question of 'Who exactly is in charge here?'. Commissar Halvorsen nodded at the UNSC sergeant. Grayson instinctively knew that the slight gesture was a sign of immense respect from the Imperial.

"Which one of you is the Sergeant?"

An older soldier with a sword and a laspistol nodded. "That'd be me, Sergeant."

"Who are your fastest runners?"

The Imperial Sergeant smiled. "Ruiz and Hakar are fast enough."

"Good, here's the planâ€¦"

Warhound Titan _Sanctus Hadrianus_

Princep Octavius Gralius bathed in the sensor data flowing into his mind. Through the mind-link, he was his Titan. He saw all the visual data the God-Machine's cameras and viewport provided. He 'heard' the radar and other sensor data reverberate within his skull. He noticed that the infantry men scampering at his feet charge forward after a small plasma shot devastated an enemy redoubt. Through the sensors, he saw both thermally and visually a Commissar carve a filthy xenos-form with his power sword. It was figuratively and literally beneath him. Octavius was far more interested in hunting the massive Xenos construct the UNSC called Scarabs. The _Sanctus Hadrianus_'s Machine Spirit was eager to test its weaponry against the enemy.

There! Octavius began to chant the Litany of Hate in concert with the blessed Machine Spirit as his eyes fell upon the vile enemy assault platform. The quadruped walker was firing a heavy plasma cannon into an unseen concentration of human troops. The Princep willed the Vulcan Mega-bolter to fire. He would avenge every human life that abomination stole! The stream of massive bolts impacted against the forward leg of the Scarab. The explosive rounds tore huge wounds in the joints. A very audible groan filled the air as the wounded leg gave way. Octavius growled in triumph as he continued to fire.

"**DIE ABOMINATION!**"

Covenant Scarab

S'kan Puhraee trembled with rage as the enemy poured an unholy amount of fire into the dead Scarab. Worse, the enemy walker sounded like it was laughing. It was enjoying the destruction of its target.

"Fire the main weapon! Destroy that monstrosity!"

The crew of the Type-47 Ultra Heavy Assault Platform enthusiastically accepted their orders. Puhraee snarled as his assault platform's primary weapon charged entirely too slowly for his liking. The smaller war machine was slaughtering entire formations of troops and Wraiths with its cannon.

"Major Domo Puhraee! The primary plasma projector is primed! It is prepared for discharge at your order!"

The Scarab's commander pounded his fist against one of the support columns. "Scour that foulâ€¦ pagan construct from this refuse heap of a world!"

Plasma roared from the projection device that formed the Scarab's 'head'. The energy rushed along city, melting glass and searing buildings. Finally, the blast struck the human walker. A new sun was born as the Plasma Projection struck home. Sangheli warriors howled in triumph. The victorious cries were quickly replaced by roars of disbelief. The War Machine was still standing. The human assault platform had _shields!_

The Plasma Cannon wheeled around to open fire on the construct. By the Forerunners, it had to die!

Sanctus Hadrianus

Princep Gralius felt a sensation similar to a hundred pinpricks across his body as the Titan's void shields collapsed. As he maneuvered the mighty _Sanctus Hadrianus_ to bring its turbolaser to bear against his, their enemy, he cursed his own foolishness. He had allowed organic emotions to cloud his judgment. Octavius had allowed the blood-lust of the _Sanctus Hadrianus_ to overcome him.

"Get those Void Shields back on line!"

The crew of the Titan responded immediately and began their holy work. Octavius immediately jinked the Titan to attempt to avoid the incoming fire from the large Plasma Cannon on the rear of the Scarab. Several blasts glanced off the Titan's left shoulder. The Princep shouted in pain as he felt his own shoulder burning. In response, he fired his Vulcan Mega-bolter. Explosions wracked the enemy weapon and it exploded. Then, the flower like protrusion of the Scarab's 'head' began to glow. It was only a matter of time before that weapon fired again. Then, a welcome buzzing appeared in the back of his skull. The Turbolaser was charged.

"Burn Xenos!"

The massive energy weapon crashed like thunder as it was fired. Armor boiled away as the beam hit home. Joints and support beams failed on the Scarab and it lost balance. As the behemoth fell, it fired its main weapon in its death throes. The Plasma Projection streaked skyward and caused energy cascades in the hovering Covenant Capital ship.

Princep Octavius Gralius began to laugh.

Mombasa Sewer System

Yutob staggered through the most disgusting place he had ever experienced. The smells of this place were even worse than any human created smell his Uggnoy nose had ever had the displeasure of being subjected to. The pain in his arm had gone, but it had been replaced by a horrifying numbness. Worse, he was unarmed except for a single Plasma grenade. Yutob was no Sangheli by any stretch of his shattered imagination, but he knew better than to use his Holy Flare in such tight quarters. At least it was warm. That was the one nice thing about human worlds. They were warm, horrible smelling and full of maniacs to be sure, but warm nonetheless.

Then Yutob saw the most beautiful sight he had ever seen. A Huragok was attempting to fix a heavily damaged Wraith. Yutob noticed that something had boiled away layers of armor from the front. A pit of fear gripped him as he considered the possibility that the damage was connected to the New Enemy. He bit back the fear and started moving as fast as he could. As he exited the foul human tunnels, he noticed for the first time the toll of the battle. Dozens of Wraiths were arranged in blocks. All of them were heavily damaged. Some, in fact, were being torn apart of salvage due to their incredible damage.

A Major Domo Sangheli saw the wounded Grunt and barreled over to the wounded Uggnoy.

"Explain yourself!" His voice was harsh, but it was lyrical to Yutob.

"Gladly, boss! But can I see a Doc first?"

The Domo was caught off guard by the enthusiasm of the Grunt. "Very well."

Yutob fell in beside his new commander. His old one was undoubtedly dead by now. The New Enemy had probably hacked him up like the rest of Yutob's pack.

"Boss, there is something I have to tell you. There be some humans you need to know aboutâ€¦"

Hospital District, Mombasa

Richard Wright battered aside the Sangheli warrior's melee attack and swung Skalletjuv in a viscous downward swing. The Daemon Weapon eagerly chewed through the Elite's energy shield and armor. The Warp-sharpened teeth ate their way through flesh and spilled the alien's blood. Richard roared in praise to his patron, his god. The cries of dying enemies, the splash of blood and the growl of the chain ax were the only hymns Khorne required. Deep within Richard's mind, he heard the bound Daemon of Skalletjuv urging him on to even greater acts of violence. Richard's vision was focused solely on his next prey. A Covenant Ghost screamed towards him firing its plasma cannons. The blessings of his God had enhanced his dexterity to almost Spartan levels. How he long to hunt one of those warriors! There was a worthy prize for Khorne's Skull Throne! He redirected his focus managing to doge the plasma blasts and leapt at the last

possible moment. The Sangheli's eyes went wide as Richard landed on the front of skimmer. The Covenant warrior struggled to keep his sanity in the face of the oppressive Chaos Corruption seeping off Richard.

"**Blood for the Blood God!**"

A series of hacks reduced the Sangheli to a bloody stump. The Berserker leapt from the doomed jet bike moments before it crashed into a long culled building. The guns and screams fell silent. Richard walked among the corpses and claimed each skull for Khorne. He noticed that only half of his original company was left. Only those who were worthy of the Lord of Skull's favor remained. Richard acknowledged that the mindless rages were cathartic and necessary to the purge the weak from his ranks. However, in the interest of survival, Richard would have to reassert some form of martial discipline. But was that not an act of worship? Was Khorne not the God of martial honor and skill as well as the Lord of Skulls and rage? Yes, only in the clarity of battle could Richard ever hope to truly understand his place in the stratagems of his master.

"**Skulls for the Skull Throne!**"

New Mombasa Police Precinct 13

Kasrkin Sergeant Emanuel Haer clawed his way out of the wreckage of the Pelican landing craft that was transporting his squad and a number of UNSC ODS'T troopers. The transport was wrecked beyond even salvage. It was only the Emperor's blessing that any of the soldiers had survived at all. He shot a series of hand gestures to the rest of his squad. Haer dug his power sword from the rubble and scanned the buildings for any sign of the enemy. An ODS'T officer made his way over to the Kasrkin.

"Sergeant, we getting distress calls on the bird's radio. Looks like some scientists are holed up in the Local Police HQ. Big wigs, it looks like. They are broadcasting some high level codes."

Haer activated his auspex. "What are our orders?"

"Secure the scientists and wait for extraction. Then we go join the party." The ODS'T saw the disappointment on Haer's face. "I know you'd rather join the Big Show, but half my squad is dead. Hell, I want to be out there killing those fracking uglies more than you can imagine. But these scientists worked on the SPARTAN program. Higher ups believe that they might be able to figure out some tech that could even the playing field. Sergeant, I'm asking for your help."

Haer extended his hand. "We're Kasrkin. We do what we can for mankind."

The ODS'T officer took the extended hand. "Thank you."

Without a further word, the under strength squads moved out. The elite soldiers advanced silently. It was impossible not to notice the unnatural quiet of the city streets. Mombasa was a massive city. There should be thousands of people in this district alone. Instead, there was an unnatural silence. Then, as they rounded entered deeper into the habitat block, one of the reasons for the silence was

revealed to them.

It was something out of the Despoiler's Black Crusades. The Kasrkin immediately began praying to the Emperor. Some of the ODS'T vomited. Others cursed loudly, swearing bloody vengeance on whatever monsters carried out this act.

Hundreds of corpses, all decapitated, had been staked to the wall in a giant rune of one of the Dark Powers.

"DON'T LOOK AT IT!" Haer screamed as he struggled to avert his eyes. The abominable energies seeping from the rune were hacking away at the sanity of all the troopers.

"Vatore! Cleanse it!"

Another Kasrkin spooled up his Plasma Gun and fired. The energy weapon seared away the blasphemous symbol. A comforting wave of mental and spiritual calm washed over the group. An ODS'T trooper named Sobieski wiped some vomit from his face.

"My god in heaven! What the hell was that?"

Vatore put down his Plasma Gun and made the Sign of the Aquila to shield his soul. "A marker of the Great Enemy."

The ODS'T officer, Baker, turned away and started to move towards their objective. In truth, he was merely trying to put as much distance from the ruined symbol as possible. "I'm calling in an artillery strike on this area."

Haer nodded and motioned for the soldiers to advance. All were showing signs of discomfort but thankfully no worse symptoms of exposure to such a blasphemy. It was only the discipline and devotion of the assembled warriors that minimized the damage. There would be damage. No one who looked upon a Rune of Khorne, or any of the Dark Gods, could emerge unscathed. They would spend many hours with a priest or psychiatrist after this mission. Even then, the whispers would remain deep within the dark corners of their soul.

The troopers moved double time to the police station where the scientists were waiting. It was doubly important that the elite soldiers reach the objective quickly. If Chaos subverted the researchers and their wealth of military technology knowledge, the consequences were horrifying. As the besieged station came into view, the troopers felt a mix of dread and relief. The ground in front of the building was littered with the corpses of Chaos warriors and policemen. Suddenly, a burst of fire sang out from a window. It was filled with panic and desperation and missed widely. However the ODS'T and Kasrkin, seasoned veterans all, took cover.

"Hold your fire! We're with the UNSC and the Imperium!" Lt. Baker shouted.

There was a lull in the noise and a nervous voice responded. "Prove it."

"I'm Lt. Cameron Baker. UNSC Serial Number Seven-Six-Delta-Three-Three-One-Zebra-Four-Eight. I'm with the 2nd ODS'T Division out of Sinai command and I've got five of the Imperium

of Man's Kasrkin here. They hate theâ€¦| _things_ you've been fighting more than you can now."

The nervous voice shouted back. "How do we know you aren't trying to trick us?"

Haer closed his eyes and accepted the Emperor's Guidance. He rose to his feet. "Because if we were the foul servants of Chaos, we would not be speaking with you. And I would not be _standing_ out in the open."

"Alright! Get in here quick, no telling when those bastards will be back!"

Haer motioned for Baker to come closer. "Be wary, sir. We don't know how they have been affected by the repeated Chaos attacks. They could be unstable or worse."

"Understood, Sergeant. Thank you for that. I don't know how long it would have taken to convince them we were friendlies."

"I did my duty." Haer said simply. Truthfully, Haer had no idea what he had just done. His action went against all common sense, his years of training and his years of combat. Was it the will of the Emperor that had caused him to do something so foolish?

The entrance to the station was as fortified as its inhabitants could make it. Desks, lockers, anything that stood any chance of stopping enemy fire were piled in front of the doors. There were a handful of machineguns set up in some of the windows. Pistols and shotguns seemed to be the most common weapon. They were decently equipped for dealing with minor civil disobedience. Against the predations of Chaos and the Covenant, they were doomed.

Baker shifted his weapon a bit. "Who is in charge here?"

The young officer who let them in looked around hurriedly. "I am."

Haer flourished his power sword to keep his adrenaline under control. "How old are you son?"

The young policeman gulped. "Twenty-five, sir."

One of the Kasrkin turned his head slightly as he took up a firing position. "Stick with us and you'll make it to twenty six."

Haer nodded. "Where are the tech-priests?"

The assembled police officers looked at each other in confusion. "What is a tech priest? We only have some scientists holed up in the Conference room."

Baker chuckled. "That's them. Haer, who's your number 2?"

Haer smiled. "Corporal Vatore. Work with whoever Lt. Baker leaves here."

The Corporal pushed aside a table and smiled as he hefted his Plasma gun. "Yes sir. We won't let you down."

The two officers entered the conference room and took stock of the situation. There were a couple of scientists. One female scientist was sobbing to herself in a corner. She was clearly distraught. Baker raised an eyebrow to silently ask: _What do you think about this one?_ Haer smiled slightly. That was a good sign. The pair followed the same procedure for each of them. None bore any sign of Corruption. Only two of them weren't reduced to panicked blobs by their hellish experience. An older wheelchair bound man was trying to comfort his colleagues while a bombastic younger man was trying to rally them.

"Excuse me! May I have your attention please, ladies and gentlemen?" Lt. Baker shouted. Nearly a dozen pair of eyes turned towards him.

"How many soldiers do you have?" The younger scientist said as he leaned against the wall.

"We have enough to ensure your safety until a Pelican or Valkyrie can be deployed to extract us to safety. "

The younger scientist stood taller. "I am Dr. Tyson Rawlings. You are aware that under ONI Directive Eta-7, I can take command of any UNSC operation in order to safeguard the knowledge in my possession."

Lt. Baker and Haer exchanged an unspoken agreement. "Unfortunately, Doctor Rawlings, this is not a UNSC operation."

Doctor Rawlings stuttered his disbelief and the older scientist chuckled at his colleague's exasperation.

"The current operation is under the authority of Sergeant Haer and his Kasrkin. The Imperium of Man, particularly the Cadians have far greater experience in combating the forces of Chaos. What is left of my squad is merely providing assistance."

The bitterness in the last part of the statement was unmistakable. However, the opportunity of give ONI the proverbial finger was too good to pass up. Sergeant Haer was difficult to read. He seemed to have slipped into a mask that Baker hadn't seen before.

Haer stepped forward. "We are in the territory of the Great Enemy, Doctor. You have seen their barbarity. If you wish to survive, you will follow _my _directives. Emperor willing, we'll all make it out of here whole."

Rawlings practically leapt at Sergeant Haer. "I ****demand**** you take me to the nearest UNSC location!"

Haer rested his hand on the hilt of his Power Sword. "The nearest UNSC position is the frontlines. You want us to lead you nearly 5 miles through narrow city streets teeming with Chaos taint and Covenant snipers?"

"YES!"

"You are a complete and total fool, Tyson!" The older scientist shouted. "We are in a relatively secure facility with a squad of hardened veterans with a safe route out on the way and you want to

risk their lives and yours travelling through territory held by the most vile foes humanity has ever faced?"

"_Shut up, Doctor Tzavaras!_"

In an instant, Doctor Rawlings was sprawled on the floor, knocked out. Sergeant Haer was standing over him grimacing.

"We have to assume that the exposure to Chaos has caused temporary insanity at best or that he was beginning to slip into corruption at worst. I swear upon the soil of Cadia that I will protect you all."

The other scientists spoke amongst themselves in nervous and excited tones. At least their minds were focused on Haer's actions instead of the horrors that lurked beyond the walls. The Kasrkin noticed the crippled scientist wheeling towards him.

"I must apologize for my associate. It seems he was not as in control as he would have believed. Tell me, how long have your people been fightingâ€¦ Chaos?"

Haer frowned. "As long as Cadia's been colonized."

"And you've resisted?"

The Cadian thought he saw the flash of an idea in the old man's face, but the moment passed quickly. "Mind, body and soul."

Near the Ruined Chaos Marker

The Not-Samuel roared as he beheld the defilement of Khorne's Icon. Those insignificant human bastards! A pack of Richard's warriors who had either willingly or unwilling allowed demons to supplant their own souls had accompanied the Daemon-host. Not-Samuel knew exactly where the pawns of the Imperium and the UNSC had headed. There blasphemy would be repaid with suffering and blood. Their flayed skin would be presented to Khorne-himself. No mortals would dare stand against his Master. He bellowed Khorne's Battle-cry and sprinted towards the Police Station with his minions in tow. There will be BLOOD!

Police Station of Precinct 13

"Incoming!"

A Police Officer screamed with fear poisoning every word. He dared not fire because the fierce looking Kasrkin corporal in charge had not given the word. Somehow, the officer knew that he'd rather take his chance against the madmen outside than against the Imperial soldier.

"Calm down, son. We've faced worse and lived to tell about it."

Suddenly, everyone's vision became fuzzy. Almost as if they were watching an antique television with bad reception. One of the younger officers began to convulse violently and bit his own tongue off. Still, the Kasrkin and ODST stood firm.

"Anoint them with their own blood!" The soldiers and officers began to open fire. Lt. Baker and Sergeant Haer joined the firing line shortly thereafter. Hellgun blasts and tracer rounds raced to meet the charging monstrosities. Several of the officers could not take the palpable sense of evil radiating off the advancing horrors and broke. They ran for the rear of the buildings.

Still, the Kasrkin and ODST stood firm.

One of the charging Chaos berserkers was struck by a Hellgun blast. His arm was ripped from his body, along with a good chunk of his chest. The thing, for no human could survive that, struggled to continue its advance before a burst of Battle Rifle fire ripped apart its throat. It collapsed and burst into flames. A scientist who had dared to look upon the battle screamed and grabbed a dropped police pistol. He shot himself.

Still, the Kasrkin and ODST stood firm.

Other berserkers fell to the withering fire from the untainted humans. One of the Blood God's chosen was reduced to cinders by a direct hit from the Plasma Gun. Even as he fell, he spat blasphemies and curses. The last police officer struggled began to bleed profusely from his eyes and ears.

"For Earth!" He screamed as he collapsed. Haer said a prayer for the man's honored soul. He died defending the sacred homeworld of mankind from the Great Enemy. No human could ask for a more blessed death.

The last pair of Heretics finally reached the walls of the facility. They had survived through the foul protections of the Warp. No infantry should have been able to reach the position. One of the creatures crashed through the windows and cleaved an ODST in half, even as the same trooper emptied a submachine gun clip into its chest. A moment of terrible realization dawned upon the Kasrkin.

Daemon-hosts. The enemies were Daemon-hosts.

"Drive them back! The scientists must escape!" Baker screamed as he fired at the horrific enemy. He struggled to maintain his soul. His head felt like it was splitting apart and he could barely see. But he would die fighting this monster before he would submit.

"**For the Imperium! For the UNSC! For Terra!**"

The Kasrkin screamed as they charged. A flurry of slashes from large combat knives and Haer's Power Sword sent one of the possessed warriors reeling. As the creature stumbled backwards, a volley of UNSC fire tore vicious wounds in his body. The blood that fell from his bullet holes was thick and oily. Haer cut it into pieces with his power sword.

A wet scream filled the room as the Not-Samuel tore a Kasrkin in half. The Daemon tossed the pieces of the warrior towards opposite ends of the room as he advanced on the other soldiers. In his wake, the ground boiled and physical corruption sprouted behind him. Vatore was struck with a backhand that broke his jaw and sent him crashing through a table. Two ODST Helljumpers opened fire. They watched in

shock as their rounds were burnt away by a wall of Warp Energy. Not-Samuel grabbed Haer by the throat and threw him against the far wall. His Power Sword fell a foot in front of the open door.

Another ODSST collapsed, his mind shattered by the presence of Chaos. He resisted until the end, firing his rifle in the general direction of the Daemon. Flame seeped from the cuts and bullet holes riddling the Not-Samuel. However, the mortal soldiers were withering under the presence. Not-Samuel kicked Lt. Baker in the gut and sent him careening into a wall. He collapsed and drew his pistol. His vision was growing dim and he heard soldiers and civilians screaming all around him.

"Die you fucker!" Baker managed to scream as he pulled the trigger. The bullet managed to graze the shoulder of his hated enemy.

"You first, maggot! I will burn away your soul!" The Daemon spoke in a voice that seemingly bent reality. Baker's ears began to bleed.

"No, you will not. Your master, Khorne, holds no Dominion in this place."

The Daemon turned to the door in a rage. "***NO!***"

Doctor Tzavaras wheeled into the room. Not-Samuel began to pant and groan as his connection to the Materium was washing away. Then, for the first time in its existence, it knew fear. Doctor Tzavaras _rose to his feet_ and picked up Sergeant Haer's Power sword. Khorne's Servant began to tremble with rage as he watched the human appraise the weapon.

"A fine blade. It has been far too long since I wielded a sword."

"IT CAN'T BE! NO, NO, NO!NOT** YOU!***"

10. Chapter 10

Kar Duniash Central Citadel

He was Edrik Nuliez, veteran of hundreds of wars against the foul enemies of his Emperor and Governor-General of Kar Duniash; the Supreme Commander of all Imperial Guardsmen in Segmentum Ultima, and he was decidedly uncomfortable.

Sitting and standing across the table from him was a collection of men and women that he had no authority over. It was a situation he didn't experience very often. A pair of Space Marine Sergeants, several Captains and even two Chapter Masters stood off to one side. Lord General Nuliez knew from over a century of experience that Astartes were only truly comfortable on the field of battle or in the company of other Astartes. He respected them and even considered a bare handful of them friends. Edrik realized that his thoughts had turned to Brother-Sergeant Gregori of the Spirit Gauntlets as they often did. What was it like for his friend inside that battle-sarcophagus?

The Astartes respected and on some level even understood. They, like

Nuliez, were warriors and sworn defenders of the God-Emperor's domains and subjects. On an intellectual level, he realized that the same was technically true of the second group. But, damn it, you would never know by looking at them. _Inquisitors_. Nuliez was guarding his thoughts. He didn't know if one of them was a bloody psyker or had an attendant who was one. In his two hundred years of life, he had met several Inquisitors. None of the experiences were at all pleasant. Now there was a fething _cabal_ of the bastards in the room!

Granted, the cabal consisted of only six members but that was beside the point! Each Inquisitor could order the death of a world or call upon the Legendary Assassin Temples of Terra. However, they seemed _really_ uncomfortable whenever they dared to cast a glance at Chapter Master Khaba of the Celestial Lions. It was probably the fact that he had shown up wearing Terminator armor. Edrik knew however it was probably a grim, dark secret history between the Inquisition and the devastated Astartes Chapter.

Oh well, let the bastards sweat some. Edrik smiled politely as two pairs of Inquisitorial eyes turned towards him looking _very_ annoyed. So, there were psykers in the room. At least the Adeptus Mechanicus representative had stayed quiet and out of the way.

"If we are all ready, may we proceed?" Lord General Nuliez spoke clearly and patiently.

The Astartes nodded and grunted their readiness. The Inquisitors responded in various ways. A few polite responses, a nod or two, and one of the younger Inquisitors shrugged his shoulders. _Jackass_ thought Nuliez. The young man glared back. Edrik swallowed back a chuckle.

"We have all seen the contents of General Sturnn, Captain Paulos, Magos Micel and Brother-Captain Thomas's Astropathic Message?"

Inquisitor Agmar, the oldest of the Cabal, steepled his fingers. "We have. The VolontÃ© Vraie attests that the contents of the message are accurate and are in no way a fabrication."

"I do not doubt the words of my Captain." The Sergeant representing the Imperial Fists spoke in a gravelly tone. He did not seem amused that the words of his captain were being doubted.

Magos Tanor Ravenel turned to the group. "I have verified that the message matches Magos Micel's syntax and tone within a margin of error of 1.8354 percent. That is within acceptable ranges, but approaching tolerance levels. It can be assumed that the high level of uncertainty is caused by interference by Anomaly G43-7-Eta."

Edrik grunted dismissively. "So, we are in agreement that this message is not a trick by our enemies. The question now is how we are to proceed. If it is true that there is an entire _galaxy_ nearly free of xenos and the Great Enemy, we can ill afford _not_ to act."

Brother-Sergeant Brennus of the Ultramarines nodded. "Can we be sure that this Anomaly is stable enough for a crusade to be

launched?"

Inquisitor Acelia smiled warmly. "I have sent through a number of small probes through the anomaly. It appears to be stabilizing."

Magos Ravenel nearly jumped at the Inquisitor's announcement. "What?! The Quest for Knowledge is the purview of the Adeptus Mechanicus!"

Chapter Master Khaba growled and for a moment he looked like an angry version of his chapter's namesake. "We can discuss theological trivialities later. What forces can we send through to the other side?"

Khaba's roar silenced the brewing argument. Agmar shifted uncomfortably and the other Astartes stood impassively as statues.

Edrik wanted to place his palm against his face in annoyance, but fought back the urge. "The Imperial Navy has twenty-eight vessels available for immediate deployment. I have personally cleared one hundred regiments for deployment."

Inquisitor Acelia could not hide her disappointment. "That's all? A chance to claim an entire galaxy for the God-Emperor and you can only gather one hundred regiments?"

Lord General Nuliez shook his head. "Those are the regiments that I have personally gathered today, my lady. My aides are contacting every sector that can reach the Medusa System in any reasonable amount of time. We should have almost a thousand regiments ready to deploy soon. You must also realize that the High Lords themselves have sent me orders to strike back at the Tau. The other three hundred regiments present here at Kar Duniash are seconded for that campaign. As important as securing this new galaxy for our God-Emperor is, we can not neglect the enemies that assail us here and now."

The Inquisitor could not see the fault in the Imperial Guard Commanders reasoning and nodded. Edrik's voice began to sound like a Schola Progenium tutor explaining a simple point to a student.

"Admiral Arthanax will be arriving soon with a portion of his fleet as soon as he can return from his mission near the Damocles Gulf. Marshal Romanov of the Black Templars has also pledged his forces to the cleansing of the new galaxy. Other regiments from across the Segmentum are being gathered as we speak. I am not going to turn this glorious crusade in the New Galaxy into a Taros Debacle on a Grand Scale!"

Magos Ravenel nodded. "The Adeptus Mechanicus has computed the currently known variables from our observations of the Anomaly. We have deemed that this United Nations Space Command's industrial capacity is 75261 below the necessary levels to defeat the xenos confederation designated the Covenant. Mars shall bless them with two Type 20Auer-Kappa4 Forge Vessels. Combat forces and the Holy Titans of the Legio Covinnarius will be deployed to ensure the destruction of all abominable xenos technology."

Edrik just blinked at the long winded explanation from the representative of the Priesthood of Mars. "It seems we have already decided to take individual action. However, I will not have defenders of the Imperium tripping over themselves trying to get to this new battle field." He flipped a switch and called a servitor. "Bring me a drink. I'm going to need it after all thisâ€¦"

Installation 06

A slight breeze disturbed the tall grass to the side of the Cultist squad. The Aspiring Champion, a former battle-brother of the White Consuls chapter, growled for his charges to advance. The point Cultist tightened his grip on his sword and gulped. There was something very wrong here. The sheer rock walls on either side of him did not generate any further confidence.

"From aaaaaaaâ€¦!" Another cultist screamed as something fell from the cliff. The small balloon-like creature began burrowing into the young man's chest. His screams became very distorted and a sickly fungal growth exploded across his body. There was the very audible sound of bones breaking and repositioning as the parasite changed Brother Yut into a form more fitting its designs.

"Kill it you imbeciles!" The Aspiring Champion bellowed. The new creature slashed out with Yut's ax. The weapon became lodged in the skull of one of the cultists and more of the insectoid creatures rained down upon the cultists. Screams and desperate prayers for the intervention of the Gods filled the air. The Aspiring Champion roared as he charged into the writhing mass of creatures and the rapidly dwindling cultists. The Marine's chainsword was singing and the bladed teeth tore into anything that moved. The stubbers the cultists were equipped with bounced harmlessly off the Ceramite plates that formed the Champion's Mark VII plate. The new enemy hit the champion like a wave. Several tackled the Marine and caused him to stumble. He grabbed a frag grenade and tossed it into the flood of enemies. The explosion sent pieces of the enemy flying into the cliff faces. The terrain was decidedly in the favor of the Chaos Marine and he was the scalpel of the Dark Gods slicing away an infection. Eventually, the chainsword began to foul as pieces of the enemy and the thick ichor that poured from the wounds interfered with the mechanism that operated the weapon. He was reduced to simply bashing the enemy to death and his footing became difficult as the sheer number of enemy dead was piling up around his feet.

And then there was quiet.

The traitor Marine activated his internal vox system. "My Apostle. I have cleansed the Parasite from your left flank."

Eliphas' voice cackled. "Excellent! You have proven your loyalty, Brother. Did any of the bait survive?"

The traitor Marine stood taller, even though the gesture would remain unseen. "No my Lord. I did, however, manage to record the process by which the infection spreads. I will return with this information immediately."

Eliphas grinned. "As expected. May Chaos guide your steps."

Forerunner Gas Mine

Sesa Refum took a deep breath and nodded to the Arbiter. "I knew that you would reach this place. You may consider me an Oath Breaker, but am I not still a Sangheli Warrior?"

The Arbiter looked up at his former subordinate. "I will grant you that much before death."

Sesa leapt down from the Seraph. "Arbiter, even if you do not heed my words. Even if you spit at them for their heresies. Honor the loyal Sangheli I once was and listen."

The Arbiter tightened his grip on his Honor Blade, but did not ignite it. "I will listen so that I may know how to counter your lies."

"So long as you listen. Arbiter, the Prophets have blinded us. There are far worse evils in the galaxy than the Humans and the Jiralhanae. The Flood is but one of these evils. There is another and it is here on this ring."

The Arbiter thought of all the foulness he had seen in this defiled place. The taint of heresy, the numerous six-limbed soldier-beasts, the Parasite and lastly the Presence. Realization dawned upon the Arbiter. "You speak of the foul Presence that I felt."

"Aye. It is Chaos. It is the source of this entire debacle. You know the accusations leveled against me regarding the Prophet of Reconciliation."

The Arbiter growled. "You murdered him before coming to this place to spread your lies about the Sacred Rings. You claim that there is no Great Journey."

Sesa stared into the Arbiter's soul. "There is no Great Journey. The Halos are weapons. I will not hide from my slaying of the Prophet. Death was a release from his torment."

The Arbiter ignited his sword. "What new blasphemies are you spewing now?!"

Sesa did not even flinch. "We were on the world of Deserved Penance researching what we believed to be a Forerunner site. Where the Forerunners are Holy, this was anything but. As the Prophet delved deeper into the Dark Archives, he began to change. Eventually, something _else_ began to inhabit the Prophet. It mutated into a winged Monstrosity that was constantly pulsating with energy. It took nearly a hundred warriors to destroy the creature. The threat of taint was too severe. I glassed the planet and fled."

The Arbiter took a step forward, a holy rage building within him. "That is how you defend your first betrayal. How do you defend your denials of the Great Journey?!"

A lyrical humming filled the room. "Oh, why must you Interlopers insist on using such flowery language when describing the Installations and their operating procedures?"

The Arbiter's mandibles fell slack. "The Oracle!"

The Forerunner AI rotated to face Sesa. The Heretic Elite merely shrugged. "Oracle? I am no Oracle. I am 343 Guilty Spark, Monitor of Installation 04."

Sesa took a step forward. "You are blind Arbiter!"

"**Enough!**" The Arbiter raged and stabbed the Arch-Heretic with his blade. As Sesa Refum staggered backwards, he nodded. Only then did the Arbiter realize what he had done. His target had never been armed. K'xon tossed away the Energy sword and howled at his error.

Sesa straightened his posture. "The burden of guiding our people lies with you now, Arbiter. Stand for Order. Stand for our people. Do not let my death be meaningless, cousin."

343 Guilty Spark floated closer to the Arbiter. "You organics are so prone to fits of violence. Why did you kill him?"

"He was endangering the Great Journey. His words threatened to destroy the Covenant."

The Forerunner AI bobbed around the Elite. "But were his words untrue?"

Guilty Spark's words were like a physical blow. K'xon felt the Mark of Shame burn again. "Oracle. What is Halo?"

343's glow brightened. "More questions Splendiiaiiiiiii!"

Suddenly, Guilty Spark was encased in a field of energy and drawn towards the hanger door. Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, was waiting. The Jiralhanae casually caught the Monitor and laughed.

The Arbiter took a step forward. His pain caused by his murder of Sesa replaced by a hatred for the Jiralhanae. "**That is the Oracle!**"

Tartarus deactivated the gravity field surrounding his hammer and tossed the Oracle into the Gravity lift of the waiting Phantom. "So it is. Come. The Prophets wish to hear of your victory."

There is no victory here. The Arbiter thought bitterly.

New Mombasa Police Precinct 13

The Not-Samuel tightened his grip on his axes as he circled the interloper. Tzavaras seemingly ignored the Daemon-host as he focused his attentions on the wounded soldiers. Khorne's servant knew that his foe was perfectly aware of his location and movements. Even his thoughts and intentions were likely known by the sorcerer. With a reality bending shout, he leapt at the scientist. Tzavaras caught the Daemon in a telekinetic grip and tossed him through the ceiling without a glance. Not-Samuel crashed to the ground outside the building.

Tzavaras knelt beside Sergeant Haer. "Do not move. Your spine was broken. This will take a moment."

The scientist reached out psychically and began to heal the immense damage done to the soldier by the pawn of Chaos. Haer felt sensation return to his lower body. He looked at Tzavaras with awe coloring his features. "Whoâ€| Who are you?"

Tzavaras smiled. "What do you believe?" The old man patted Haer on the shoulder and stood up. "I need you to gather the members of your squad who are capable of moving. I will heal the others. Hurry."

The possibilities of who this man was raced through his mind. Could it be? Could he even dare to hope for such a possibility?
"Sir."

Haer realized that he had practically stuttered out the word. He hadn't been this nervous around another human being since he knocked over his mother's favorite vase as a child back home on Cadia and was standing before his father afterwards.

Tzavaras walked among the wounded soldiers. The onset of medical shock was replaced by emotional shock that they were being healed from life threatening injuries by a sideways glance from the scientist. Beyond that, they were refreshed physically and mentally. It was if they had been given nine hours of sleep and had never seen Chaos.

Tzavaras stood in front of Lt. Baker and smiled. "Welcome back, Lieutenant."

Cameron blinked a few times and realized that he wasn't even sore after getting tossed around from the Hellspawn. "I obviously missed something."

Suddenly, the Not Samuel burst through the wall and charged screaming in the language of Daemons at Baker and his healer. Unlike the first time the soldiers heard the Daemonic tongue, there were no ill effects. It was if Tzavaras' presence was shielding them from the corruption. Tzavaras glared at the Daemon and suddenly golden flames began to eat away at his corporeal form. Then in a moment of absolute terror, Not-Samuel heard his enemy use his True Name. His very being burned away and he could not even scream in defiance. His tormenter would not even allow him that small measure of relief.

The miraculous old man smiled warmly. "Oh, not too much. Can you stand?"

Lt. Baker sprang to his feet. "I can move out at any time." He turned his attention to his squad. "Status, ladies!"

A chorus of 'Greens' came from the ODST while the Kasrkin spoke excitedly amongst themselves. A scientist from the conference room tentatively peered through the door and gasped in shock.

"Behar?"

Tzavaras casts a glance at the soldiers and grins. "Well, this will be awkward."

New Mombasa, behind Covenant Lines

The Ghost's reactor went critical and exploded, sending the ruined husk careening into a nearby building. Brother Azarius leapt from behind cover and leveled his Plasma Cannon at the approaching Wraith. The roaring plasma blast struck the Covenant tank and detonated. Armor melted and warped. The antigrav drives failed and it plowed into the mound of Covenant bodies piled in the kill zone.

Captain Thomas fired his Plasma pistol into the pilot of one of the remaining Ghosts. The first shot burned away the Elite's shields and the second shot cremated a large chunk of the alien's chest.

Brother Ioannes continued to scan the killing field even as he spoke over the squad's tactical net. "Brother-Captain, a transmission from the _In Amber Clad_."

Warin nodded. "What aid do you require, Commander Keyes?"

"Captain Thomas, be advised. There is a Scarab being rerouted to your location. The other remaining Scarab is en route to the Space Elevator. Princep Gralius is attempting to reach your current location to support you. Unfortunately, he is under constant Seraph fighter attacks. It may be some time for him to successfully disengage to reach you."

Captain Thomas nodded. "What information do you have on these Scarabs, Commander?"

Information flickered across the Marine's Heads-Up Displays. The tactical readouts the UNSC possessed flashed across the Marines field of vision. Brother Rhys grunted. "This would be very easy if Brother-Sergeant Hollis and his Assault Marines were here."

Azarius nodded. "Aye, but they are not. We will have to make do with our current equipment."

Brother-Captain Thomas smiled behind his helmet. "Thank you Commander Keyes. This data will be most useful."

Miranda Keyes rested her chin on her left hand. "You're welcome Captain. Oh, and Captain?"

Warin stood up and scanned the surroundings for enemies. "Yes, Commander?"

"Kick its ass."

Old Mombasa, behind Covenant Lines

"We've got Jackals in the courtyard!" Sergeant Johnson yelled as a phalanx of Energy Shields marched into the courtyard. The Imperial Autocannon rotated and barked out nearly a dozen rounds in a second. Explosive shells detonated in the midst of the phalanx and the aliens were torn apart by shrapnel. Even as the pieces of the first wave rained down, the second wave of Grunts and their Elite masters surged from the right flank. Concentrated fire from the UNSC weapons dropped the Elites. A gaggle of Grunts was reduced to vapor from the searing blast of the Melta.

Then there was a scream. A Marine's head fell from his shoulders as the Needle round detonated in his throat. A swarm of Drones flew from

the rooftops. Needler rounds and Covenant Plasma pistol orbs crashing in the midst of the combined squad. Machine gun and lasgun fire filled the air tearing into the dozens of Drones that were sweeping over the human position like a sick parody of a cloud. The occasional burst of fire from the Imperial Guardsmen's flamer dropped scores of enemy and forced the swarm to recede like the tide.

A smile crept to the assembled troopers as the familiar whine of a Pelican Dropship filled their ears.

"Sergeant, heard you need a lift. My bird's a bit big for your bachelor pad. I see a decent LZ on the other side of the buildings. Can you reach them?"

"Copy Romeo-92. We're moving out." Sergeant Johnson responded. "Corporal Zyris, how much you got left in that melter of yours?"

Zyris shook his head as he grinned. "I've got over a day left in the Melta before I have to take it to a cogboy. Where'm I need?"

"Our rides just a short hop away. Hit that gate and we can rendezvous with the rest of the Guard and Corps."

The Gate buckled and a crash like thunder filled the air. A second impact sent the two thick wrought iron gates flying off their hinges. A Bonded Pair of Covenant Hunters stalked into the courtyard. Their shields positioned to protect the vulnerable regions of the colony of worms that gave the mighty creatures form.

Lasfire and bullets bounced harmlessly off the armor of the mighty creatures. One of the 'necks' of the Mgalekgolo stretched and 'looked' directly at the Human position. The Covenant Assault Cannon began to screech as it charged.

"Oh shit! Everybody down!" A marine screamed. All the troopers dived behind the thickest cover they could find as the green energy discharge surged forward. A massive explosion tore a sizable chunk out of the small house where Sergeant Johnson, Sierra-117, the Guardsmen and Marines were holed up. John rushed from his position and grabbed the discarded Autocannon. As he slapped a fresh oversized clip into the heavy weapon, he leapt from the still smoldering hole in the building.

The SPARTAN-II landed in the courtyard and rolled out of the way of a blast from one of the Hunters. The blast reduced an abandoned city bus to cinders. John rose to one knee as a Mgalekgolo leapt at the warrior. The colonial animal had its shield lifted high into the air in the intention of crushing Master Chief with it. John lifted the Autocannon and aimed at the now exposed midsection. He pulled the trigger and nearly lost control of the heavy weapon.

"Recoilless my ass, Cortana." Cortana could almost hear amusement in the SPARTAN's voice.

"Sorry, my mistake." Chief could almost see her holding up her hands defensively.

"Don't worry about it."

The round struck with such force that the Hunter was literally cut in half. The round continued through the target and struck a distant wall. The second Hunter roared and entered a berserk rage. The maddened creature tossed aside a Covenant Supply Crate like it was a children's toy. It was only a moment of unnatural clarity that allowed John to dodge the blow from the Lekgolo. The shield, made from the same material as the hulls of Covenant starships became lodged in one of the stone planters littering the Courtyard. Sierra-117 dropped the Autocannon and pulled a grenade from his belt and punched the armed explosive into the writhing mass of worms. John withdrew his hand and ducked behind the planter. A muffled thud and a droning 'scream' heralded the death of the Bonded Pair.

"Nice work, Chief. I think that's a new record." Cortana chuckled as she congratulated John.

"Thanks." The supersoldier's response was terse, but she had expected nothing more.

A new transmission filled the comm. "Any UNSC forces please respond."

The serial number accompanying the call for aid was Sergeant Pete Stacker of the ODS. "Go ahead Sergeant. What is your situation?" Cortana's voice shifted from the playful tone she often used with John to a very serious, very professional one.

"Our bird is down. Pilots didn't make it. We're holed up close to your location. Need assistance."

Cortana's voice hardened slightly. "We're on our way. Hold your position."

"Yes ma'am." The ODS trooper cut the transmission.

The Marines and Guardsmen slowly emerged from cover. Sergeant Johnson spit as he stood over the corpse of a Covenant Elite. "Impressive as usual, Master Chief."

John nodded. "The Pelican's waiting. Looks like we've got a lot more work to do."

The mixed squad passed through the devastated gates into the opening of a second plaza. A Pelican dropship was waiting a Marine nodded in their direction. It was the closest thing to a salute that anyone would dare in an urban battle.

A chirp alerted the squad to an incoming transmission. Miranda Keyes' voice dutifully followed. "Sergeant Johnson. I'm airlifting supplies to troops all over the city. I need you on that bird. I'll need a reliable veteran to ensure that the transfer goes smoothly between us and the Imperials."

Sergeant Johnson was already boarding the Pelican as he replied. "Roger that ma'am. I've got some Guard with me. They'll help grease the gears."

"Excellent Sergeant." There was a hint of surprise in her voice that the Guard and the Corps were already cooperating so well. But, they were both human soldiers fighting a bunch of bloodthirsty aliens so

it wasn't _that _surprising.

"Master Chief and Cortana, what is your status?"

"Green." Cortana and John replied in unison. Miranda had to fight to suppress a laugh.

Miranda Keyes reminded them of their primary objective and cut the transmission. The Spartan and the AI watched as the Pelican lifted off and headed towards the main battle line. A moment passed before Cortana spoke up.

"So, Chiefâ€¦ ready for a trip to the beach?"

11. Chapter 11

New Mombasa East Harbor Maglev Junction

A Techpriest and his attendant servitors worked with methodical precision even as a battle raged around them. Maglev Junction Twelve had been damaged and its machine spirit was too wounded to allow for the heavy shipping trains to reach the frontlines. The trains were surprisingly the safest and most efficient way to get supplies to the front and evacuate the hundreds, probably thousands of wounded to secure Adepta Sororita Order Hospitalar medicade temples. In a way, the Priest of Mars was oblivious to the brutal fight between the organics spilling all around him.

Ross Keller dove behind a pile of rubble that used to be half of the station's worker's dorm. He glanced to his left and right and made sure his squad had made it. They were not alone. Almost two hundred Covenant troops and two platoons of Imperial Guardsmen were also fighting in this nearly ruined facility. The humans had superior weapons, but the Covenant was dug in. The aliens had filled most gaps with their portable energy shields. When they ran out of Energy Shields, they piled up rubble. Some desperate Ungnoy, their morale broken and their sanity strained by the unexpected ferocity of the humans, piled up their own dead.

The sight of Grunts breaking and running even as their Elite overseers screamed and fired at the retreating cannon fodder had stunned Sergeant Keller the first time he had seen it.. The UNSC had never seen Grunts ignore their Elite commanders so obviously before. Marines were fighting with their minds and hearts filled with thoughts of vengeance. There was no mercy and neither side was taking prisoners.

"Thompson!" Keller yelled to his private over the _zip-zip-zip_ of the Imperial's lasguns and the crack of his squad's weapons. The soldier rolled over to get deeper into cover before turning his attention to his sergeant.

"Sir?" He yelled back.

"Get ready to move!" Thompson nodded. He was ready, but it didn't mean he enjoyed being the fastest member of the squad and thus the designated rabbit.

Sergeant Kolak of the Cadian 412th ran low over to his opposite

number. "Where do you need support fire?

Keller dared a glance over the pile of rubble and was promptly rewarded by a few ill aimed plasma shots. "You see that impact crater?"

"The one at 4 o'clock at about 10 meters?

Keller checked the magazine of his Battle Rifle. "That's the one."

"COVER FIRE!" The sergeants screamed and the two squads unloaded with their weapons. The Guard's heavy Bolter shrieked as it unleashed hundreds of explosive bolts. The horrified Grunts leapt from their cover and attempted to run for safety. If there was such a thing for their kind in this city. The mighty _Sanctus Hadrianus _was clearly visible in the distance fighting off a cloud of Phantoms and Seraphs that buzzed around it like flies. Thompson ran forward and was making good speed to the impact crater when his chest exploded. Then, the squads saw a second grenade ricochet off a piece of rubble and strike what was left of Thompson. A bestial roar followed and a pack of giant gorilla like creatures emerged from the ruined buildings. The central beast began to thump his chest and howl. The others quickly followed suit, some even firing their weapons in the air.

"By the Emperor, what are those things?" Gregor Hikan breathed.

"Trouble." Was all Keller managed to say in response.

Covenant Position, Mombasa City Center

Field Master Daras 'Kihree carefully guarded his emotions as he stared at the hologram of the Prophet of Regret. "Holy Prophet, I wish to know why the Jiralhanae have been deployed."

The Prophet of Regret was terrified and it showed. "I have permitted the Jiralhanae to join the battle because ****you**** can no longer control the Uggnoy. I am ordering you to draw back your forces. You will secure a tighter perimeter around my vessel and began withdrawing."

Daras' lower-left mandible twitched. "Withdraw? We have not reclaimed the Blessed Relic."

Regret shook his bulbous head. "The Forerunners had the prescience to bury this most sacred place. It will remain secure until we can return with a larger force. Then we shall wipe the pagans from the surface of this world."

"As you command, Prophet." The connection closed and one of 'Kihree's aids approached.

"Field Master, a pack of Jiralhanae are requesting assistance. They have over extended themselves and charged too deeply into human held territory."

Daras arced his head. "How clear was the transmission?"

The aid wagged his mandibles. "There was some slight

interference."

"It is tragic, but the human techno-sorcery has interfered with our communications. We did not receive our comrades desperate pleas for aid. Redeploy forces according to the Prophet's orders."

The aid snapped to attention. "At once, Field Master."

New Mombasa Maglev Station 7

Alpha Jiralhanae Vakatarus roared as he fired his Mauler at the dug in humans. His pack had pursued a retreating human horde and suddenly found themselves surrounded by numerous other units. They had secured a building and taken cover, and neither side could dislodge the other.

"Have those bastard Sangheli answered our communications?!"

His comrade with the communications gear growled. "They haven't responded."

Vakatarus grabbed the com unit and reactivated it. "***I know you can hear me, you Sangheli swine! We need support!***"

There was still no response.

"***I will return from the Beyond and murder your progeny! Do you hear Sangheli?! The Age of your dominance is over! The Jiralhanae are rising!***"

There was finally a response. Vakatarus heard a chuckle as the com connection was severed from the other side. His rage was replaced by a morbid curiosity as he heard a grinding sound advancing. The humans had stopped firing and he dared to look out from cover. A large tracked vehicle had arrived. It rotated its top turret at the Jiralhanae position. There was a moment where Vakatarus thought he saw a liquid drip from the turret. Then, the turret shrieked and the Brutes were reminded of the great magma flares of their homeworld. The flames that engulfed his body could not compare to the flames of hate Vakatarus held for the Sangheli in his final moments.

Installation 06

The beam of energy lanced from the small flying unit buzzing around the armored column of the Word Bearers. Brother Hakim opened the hatch and checked the ammo feed. The bolter barked as Hakim squeezed the trigger. The Sentinel's shields flared and collapsed as the stream of bolts impacted against it. The explosive rounds quickly finished off the construct of the Forerunners. Hakim was growing tired of the monotony of this battle. The Forerunner constructs would not engage the Chosen of Lorgar in glorious direct combat. Instead, they were seemingly content to harass the convoy. Then without warning, the buzzing servitors retreated.

The Convoy halted. Hakim joined his Brothers as they exited the transports. Eliphas, the Holy Apostle of Lorgar, stood in the center of the gathered Host. His Coryphaeus, Aeolus, stood slightly behind his master. The First Acolyte Iulianus and the sorcerer Kentarus hovered around their master. There was a second group of Sorcerers

standing some distance away. One was a female, not even an Astartes! That one such as her could stand so close to the Holy Apostle was the gravest of insults. The other two were, thankfully, full Astartes. They wore the colors of the Scrying, a splinter cabal of the Thousand Sons, widely known to have allied themselves with the Word Bearers many times during the Long War. It made the presence of the mortal female slightly more tolerable, by which Hakim meant that he would kill the witch when his masters weren't present.

Standard Bearer Ramaius rose the banner of Eliphas and bellowed loudly which drew Hakim away from his conspiracy.

"Sacred Warriors of Lorgar! Heed the word of Eliphas, chosen of the Primarch!"

Eliphas stepped forward. "Brothers, we stand on the threshold of our ultimate victory! The Index, the _Key of the Ringed Gate,_ that Lorgar, the Most Cherished of the Gods, declared we would find is within our grasp! The Parasite, the Flood, is beginning to crawl from their foul crypts and we shall purge them! Brother Hakim!"

Hakim's heart leapt at being addressed by his Apostle. "Yes, my Apostle!"

Eliphas pointed his Manreaper at the Aspiring Champion. "You will go with Sister Lucilia to the Phase Pulse Generatorium designated Alpharius. Take a thousand slaves with you and await instructions. Oh, and Brother Hakim?"

"Yes, Lord Eliphas?"

"Do take care to guard your thoughts more carefully."

Hakim's eyes went wide behind his helmet. The glorious Apostle Eliphas had never demonstrated such fine control of his Warp-touch before. Was he on a threshold himself? Hakim nodded and Lucilia strode over. Hakim looked upon the creature with disgust. _How could something so small, so not an Astartes gain the respect of the Apostle?!_ Hakim raged.

"Come, Astartes we have much work to do and the Gods are ****very**** eager to welcome the rest of your Legion to this place."

Hakim was impressed by the devotion to the True Gods evident in her voice. Hakim was also thankful that her tone also revealed that she would not be speaking much. His opinion of the witch slightly improved. He decided that he would break her neck and kill her quickly instead of flaying her alive as he originally planned.

Lucilia cast a quick glance back to her Astartes comrades. _Are you sure I can't kill this one yet, Tom_?

The Astartes Sorcerer who was once Tom of Beta Company inclined his head ever so slightly. _Not yet, Lucy. Not while our _allies_ are watching so intently. Besides, he may have some use for later. _

The second Sorcerer, Devadas, and the one who had rescued the former Tom and Lucy from Pegasi Delta and their woeful ignorance joined the mental conversation. _Listen to your companion, child. As enjoyable

as killing that Khornate leaning buffoon would be, remember that you are a student of Tzeentch and not a thrall of Slaanesh._

Lucilia turned away from her companions and began moving among the shackled and pathetic slaves. _Fine. I just hope that the Flood can give me some entertainment. _

As Lucilia began choosing the slaves to take to the Phase Pulse generators, Tom turned his Warp senses towards his teacher. _Lord Devadas. I believe that Lucy is sliding ever more towards Chaos Undivided worship._

Devadas grinned feraly behind his ornate helmet. _Oh, and you are not Te'oma?_

_I acknowledge the existence of the other Great Powers so much as I acknowledge the other pieces on the Regicide table. _

Devadas was extremely amused by his favorite pupil's statement. _Ah, an interesting theological position. So, Slaanesh, Nurgle and Khorne are merely pawns?_

Te'oma turned his head towards the elder sorcerer. _They are far too useful to be pawns. Khorne is more akin to the Redoubt; direct and lacking any form of subtlety. Slaanesh, I equate to the Cardinal; more nuanced than the Brass Lord but in truth equally direct in her desires. Nurgle is the Partisan; always afraid to take the final step forward, always afraid to embrace Change._

Devadas disabled his external vox and laughed. _How very clever, boy. How very clever._

The pair turned their attentions back to the physical events surrounding them. Eliphas had finished his blessing of Hakim and Lucilia's warband and had moved on.

"Brother Kalis, you will be accompanied by the Sorcerer Te'oma. Chose your slaves and go with Chaos!"

Devadas nodded at his pupil. _Do not lose sight of the Strands in the Weave of Fate, Te'oma._

Of course not, my Lord. Tom sorely wished for this errand to end. It was all a sideshow to Tom's ultimate goal: the burning of Onyx.

High Charity, Sangheli quarter

The Arbiter and Rtas 'Vadumee walked side-by-side through the main thoroughfare of the Sangheli section of High Charity. It was comforting to return to this place after the tribulations of the battle against Sesa Refum. The two Elite heroes were being led by a pair of Major Domos. Evidently, several of the councilors wished to speak with them about the mission. It wasn't surprising given that the Prophets had deemed it necessary to deploy an Arbiter.

Rtas 'Refumee turned to his friend and former commander. "You have been carrying a burden since we departed the battle field. Will you not share it, Arbiter?"

The Arbiter shook his head. "Not yet, my friend. I will reveal everything when we meet with our Councilors."

A door slid open and Councilor N'gyven greeted the warriors. "We are honored that you could join us so soon after your mission. However, there is a development that I feel that you both must be aware of."

The familiar sound of an energy shield activating around the room filled the air. An old Oracle Masters scanned the room. When he was confident he had eliminated all the listening devices, he nodded to the assembled Councilors and Sangheli officers.

Councilor N'gyven inclined his head. "There is no need for formalities here and we have little time. We have discovered the Heresy among the Covenant. This foulness has extended into the ranks of the Prophets. Naturally, Sangheli have been able to resist this corruption."

The words _corruption_ and _foulness_ reverberated in the Arbiter's mind. "This corruption was partly to blame for Sesa Refum's fall from grace."

The assembled Elites began to express their dismay, some even cursing the memory of Sesa. The Arbiter held up his hands. "He was not tainted. The Prophet of Reconciliation was consumed by an entity. The taint threatened to destroy the world and he stopped it."

Councilor N'gyven crossed his arms. "We will need to verify this. I can dispatch a fleet under the pretenses of looking for hidden human bases along the frontier. The Council is also concerned about the disappearance of the Prophet of Disdain."

A younger Councilor growled. "This outbreak of heresy only started when the mongrel Jiralhanae began crawling out of their shadowed holes."

The Arbiter was surprised to hear that several of the older and more conservative councilors added their consent to the young councilors position.

Rtas Vadumee nodded. "We cannot ignore the increase in strife among our Covenant since the Jiralhanae began actively participating. How many of our brothers have they killed in their rages? Less than three demi-cycles ago, they murdered Tyok 'Makuree on the steps of a _temple_! And what did our prophets do? ****Nothing!****"

The memory of Makuree's death was fresh on the minds of all Elites. Open infighting had narrowly been avoided by the launching of an offensive against a freshly discovered human system.

The Arbiter paced around the room. "We can not afford to split the Covenant. But, I fear that we will be forced to defend our Faith from this taint, this chaos."

Councilor N'gyven nodded. "I believe that we will not have a choice, Arbiter."

A second councilor hissed. "The damned Brutes will start the war before we do."

A series of shocked exclamations filled the room. A councilor using a _human_ word to describe a member of the Covenant?

An Honor Guard who had managed to attend the meeting inclined his head. "It seems the pagan humans finally gave a name that was earned."

Hsera Uliroee gave a guttural laugh. "Simians, why must all of them be so infuriating?"

The levity was welcomed. A pair of councilors rose to their feet. "We shall depart to ensure the directives of this gathering are known by all Sangheli."

As the councilors left, some to meet with the Lekgolo and others went to inform the Uggnoy Matriarchies allied most closely with the Elites of the developments. The Arbiter knew that the lines had been drawn. The Covenant was on the brink and the smallest upheaval would tear it asunder.

Outskirts of New Mombasa, Kenyatta Bridge

The fighting for Mombasa had reached a bloody stalemate. The Covenant had been falling back steadily and had taken thousands of casualties. Mombasa had taken horrific damage in the fighting. The fires that were gutting the city could be seen from miles. The refugee camps at Bamburi and other small villages watched in horrified awe as the sounds of war washed over them. The roar of aircraft, both human and Covenant, dancing their waltz of death filled the skies. The ceaseless pounding of UNSC and Imperial tanks and artillery formed a brutal bass to the music of war. Above it all, the hated form of the Covenant Assault Carrier floated. The armies of mankind had not been spared the fury of the maelstrom that was the Battle of Mombasa. Hundreds of Gaurdsmen and nearly an equal number of UNSC marines had fallen. It is the fifty second year of the 26th Century, and there is only war.

General Sturnn ducked as he entered the rear compartment of the Command Chimera. Commissar Bostic nodded to his friend and colleague. "General Sturnn, the battle against the xenos is progressing admirably. I must commend the zeal of your soldiers. The UNSC is also doing much better than expected. Even their primitive autoguns are proving very useful. It pleases me to report that I have only had to carry out one field execution for cowardice."

General Sturnn nodded. "That is good news." He glanced at a makeshift video screen. "What am I looking at Johan?"

The Commissar looked over his shoulder. "A communication's device provided by our brethren of the UNSC. It allows us access to their surviving satellite network and to their high altitude observer servitors."

General Sturnn nodded and hit the activation rune. The screen fizzled to life and the scene of a squad of Imperial Guardsmen fighting alongside UNSC marines. Sturnn found himself smiling at the image. The fact that they were integrating so well in such a short amount of time. This was, in Sturnn's mind, humanity at its most noble.

Sergeant Rogal Kolak was the leader of the Guardsmen Sturnn was watching with such admiration. The Cadian was completely unaware of his general's approval. His thoughts were completely focused on dragging his wounded comrade to safety. All around him, Covenant plasma was burning away the cover. Rogal placed the injured marine down and called for a medic. The mixed unit's medic rushed over and began to treat the plasma burns.

"Hey, Cadian." The wounded marine hissed as the medic wrapped a medicated wrap around the Plasma burn on his chest.

Sergeant Kolak knelt at the soldier's side. "What is it mate?"

"In your religion, hating aliens helps you get into a better afterlife right?"

Rogal grinned. "The Emperor asks only that you hate the xenos."

"Well, I just earned a free trip looks like."

The squads let a tension releasing laugh slip before a plasma grenade detonated a few feet from their position. The lack of shrapnel from the energy blast was welcomed. The charge of Sangheli was less than welcome. A single shot from the Plasma Gun burnt away the top half of an Elite. Four Elites was an even match against a dozen humans and machine gun and las fire became cautious for fear of hitting the other human warriors. One Elite landed a viscous melee attack on a marine and shattered the unfortunate man's arm. The combined fire of two of the marine's fellows dropped the alien's shields. A bayonet tore out his guts. Two more soldiers were tossed around by the seeming leader of the assault. A sudden cry filled the air as more Guardsmen and marines charged from cover. Commissar Halvorsen was at the front, firing his laspistol at the Elites. His power sword held low at his side. A volley of las and slug fire dropped one of the Elites. The arrival of a wave of humans turned the tide. The Commissar's power sword easily sliced through the depleted shields of the Sangheli warrior. Sangheli do not die without exacting a blood price, however. The human platoon lost several soldiers before the final breath left the last Elite.

An approaching Pelican whipped up the dust and light debris. Sergeant Keller heard a buzzing in his radio.

"Sergeant Keller, go ahead, Commander Keyes."

Commander Keyes' voice was crisp and concise. "Sergeant, we need your platoon on that Pelican. General Sturnn is beginning his push to capture the bridges. I want to make sure that the Covenant doesn't destroy the tunnel system."

"Aye aye, ma'am. Be advised, we have numerous wounded. Request permission to return to In Amber Clad to ensure that they receive critical medical attention."

Beaches of New Mombasa

A Covenant Shadow Transport plowed into the sands of the beach as a Frag grenade detonated inside the operator's bubble. Master Chief

sprinted across the rubble strewn ground towards the ODS position. Sgt. Stacker's squad had been one of many thorns in the side of the Covenant. Cortana had reported that the elite forces the UNSC had deployed were causing the Covenant to divert large number of their warriors to counter the threat posed by the SPARTAN and the best of the Imperium's forces. It was satisfying in a way.

The Covenant fire redirected from the wrecked transport bus to the charging Spartan. John jinked as he advanced on the alien warriors. Occasionally, a blast from an Elite's plasma rifle glanced against Sierra-117's energy shields. He reached effective range of his weapons with only a minor drop in his shield strength. A burst from his battle rifle dropped a Jackal with a carbine. The ODS that managed to toss the frag grenade into opened up with a submachine gun and dropped a handful of the Grunts. A veritable wall of fire erupted from the rubble surrounding the Covenant holdouts. Chief reached the position and dove for cover next to one of the troopers. The MJOLNIR suit was tough, but it wasn't invincible. Blue Uggnoy Blood splattered John's armor as the methane tank of a Grunt detonated.

Pete Stacker emerged from his position and walked over to the Spartan as one of his men but a round into a wounded Sangheli. "Good to see you Chief, Cortana."

Master Chief nodded and Cortana spoke up. "How's your squad, Sergeant?"

"We're in one piece ma'am. If we'd crashed anywhere but the beach, we'd be pulp."

Cortana's voice still carried the weight of command, but there was an edge of amusement to it. "Sergeant, mind helping us kill a Scarab?"

The ODS nodded. "We'd be honored, ma'am."

New Mombasa, City Center

Captain Thomas leapt the gaping wound in the large building as he advanced to the edge. The constant thudding of the advancing Scarab allowed him to advance stealthily. His brothers were waiting to launch the diversionary attack against the Covenant staging ground. Warin knew he had to be quick with his objective. The Imperial Fist had no doubt that his brother's could destroy the xenos infantry and light skimmers. The giant plasma cannon on the Covenant assault platform was a different matter.

There! Warin's expanded Combat awareness caught a glimpse of the spider like monstrosity as it stormed through the city. Strangely, the Marine was thinking of the Scarab as a mechanical parody of a Tyranid bio-titan.

"In position, Brother-Captain." The quick, harsh voice of brother Azarius crackled in the Space Marine's internal vox.

"Wait for my signal, brother." _Thud, thud, thud._ Warin knelt and appraised the Covenant weapon as a hunter appraises the worth of a prey-beast as a trophy. A Uggnoy pair had set up a plasma support weapon on the catwalk top of the walker. Burn marks, craters and

other scars covered the Type-47 UHAP. The beast had not found its prey without teeth as it had expected. Warin rose to his feet.

"Begin the operation, Brother Azarius. Secure the landing zone."

"Yes, Brother Captain. For Dorn! For the Emperor!"

Warin took a running leap from his position. No fire raged from the plasma cannons as the bright yellow power armor sailed through the air. A Grunt barely had time to look up as several hundred pounds of ceramite and adamantium armored and genetically enhanced human fell upon him. The second Grunt tripped over himself as he tried to flee. Chainsword met flesh as Warin closed the gap in a half step. The hiss of plasma fire filled the air as a Sangheli rounded the corner with a small group of Uggnoy in tow. Warning runes appeared on the Space Marine's visor as some of the enemy fire impacted against his Mark VIII plate. Imperial Plasma fire answered that of the Covenant. A trio of shots incinerated the Elite. As the Grunts broke and ran, Warin pulled the bundle of Krak grenades from his belt. He reached the core in a handful of steps and applied the improvised explosive device. Captain Thomas found himself wishing for a melta bomb, but this would have to do. He sprinted and leapt. The core detonated. Flames licked at his armor and the Marine landed with an audible crash on the Pelican drop ship.

A new voice resounded in the vox. "For a brick, you flew pretty good, Astartes."

A forced chuckle escaped the Son of Dorn's lungs. "Thank you, Sergeant Johnson."

New Mombasa, Port Quarter

"You know that this is one of your crazier ideas, Chief."

Chief adjusted his position. "So, go back to the In Amber Clad with Sergeant Stacker."

Cortana's voice became the verbal equivalent of a wagging finger. "Unfortunately for you, I like crazy. Looks like you're stuck with me."

"So, ETA on the target?"

A heartbeat passes. "I've calculated everything. Go... Now!"

The roar of the overpowered engine of the Mongoose echoed throughout the enclosed office building. The MJOLNIR equipped super soldier's battered aside chairs and desks. The large glass windows loomed larger. John kept going. The Mongoose rocketed through the air towards the approaching Scarab.

This is definitely one of my riskier plans. A note of grim humor flashed in his mind. Cortana routinely monitored John's mental state and was both pleased and slightly unnerved by his amusement. It was a still moment of connection.

A Jackal sniper craned his neck in the direction of the approaching

sound. The creature's beak like jaw dropped as Master Chief kicked off of the Mongoose. The nine hundred pound vehicle impacted against the alien with a metallic crunch and a wet snap. As the SPARTAN landed, the M274 exploded. The straining of metal was audible, even over the din of the advancing human armies. A pair of Sangheli surged from the fires of the Mongoose wreck. Their energy shields were shimmering from the thermal energy of the fire.

"Chief, watch out! He's got a sword!"

The crackle of the energy blade caused a ripple in the Spartan's shields as it narrowly missed. Spittle rolled off the polarized visor as the Elite roared in disbelief. John pulled the trigger on his shotgun and the Elite flew backwards with a basketball-sized hole in its torso. Chief then felt like he was hit by a bus. An Elite had tackled him from behind. The human lashed out with his left elbow and was rewarded with a wet _crack_. John sprang to his feet as his enemy rolled over. The alien was groaning, likely with a concussion if the sizable dent in his helmet was any indication.

A full cascade of Covenant fire nearly dropped Sierra-117's shields. Cortana was shouting something about keeping his head down and distances between the Scarab and friendly forces. John's vision and focused narrowed completely. Plasma crawled past his head as he emerged from behind the raised walkway. He aimed and fired. A Uggnoy collapsed. John rolled forward, narrowly dodging an arcing plasma grenade. The Spartan rose to his feat and fired another burst from his M7. The last Jackal sharpshooter fell. Master Chief threw his final frag grenade. The disturbingly child like screaming of the Uggnoy filled the air. Chief pressed on. The Elite commander was staggered and bleeding from the grenade. His shields were down and it was a trivial matter to reduce his head to a stump.

John's perception of time stretched and returned to normal. He stood as the only living thing on the Scarab. It was quiet, even the crashing of the walker's advance had stopped. What had happened? What had he just done?

It was Cortana who broke the silence. She always broke the silence. John realized that Cortana could always seem to bring him back to reality.

"Well, Chief. I think we've officially crossed into bad action movie cliché territory."

"Two questions. One, what are you talking about? Two, since when did you become an expert in bad movie clichés?"

"First one: You just jumped an ATV out of an office building onto an alien war machine. Second, I get bored easily when I'm not in your head."

John humphed. It was probably the closest Cortana was going to come to getting her compatriot to laugh. He walked to the core and placed the satchel charge. A Pelican hovered overhead and lowered a lift cable designed for lifting damaged Warthogs. Chief grabbed on and climbed up. The giant gauntleted hand of one of the Space Marines hauled him in. Below them, the Scarab exploded in a brilliant flower of fire and debris. Cortana took a simulated deep breath as the Pelican touched down inside _In Amber Clad_.

"Impressive, Spartan." John didn't recognize the voice, but Cortana whispered dramatically that it was Battle-Brother Ioannes.

"Thanks, Ioannes."

Before the Space Marine could return the thanks, Commander Keyes' voice came over the combined communications network. "The Prophet's bugging out! Repeat, Regret is attempting to flee!"

The voice of Captain Paulos cut in. "Do not fear, Commander. Our fleets control the Orbit of Holy Terra! We shall purge him as soon as he breaks the atmosphere."

A second panicked voice exploded over the comm. "Oh my God! Slipspace Rupture forming off the bastard's bow! The son of a bitch is going to jump inside the city!"

Lord Hood's face was pale at the horror of the thought that was in everyone's mind. There were nearly 20,000 Gaurdsmen and Marines still in the projected zone of annihilation and another 10,000 in the range of the pressure wave. There was no telling how many civilians were trapped in New Mombasa. "Commander, your the only ship in range! Get in close and do everything you can to stop him!"

The _In Amber Clad _accelerated violently, firing it's Archer Missiles and MAC cannon with wild abandon. The ship's straining structure screamed like a berserk warrior shouting a primeval war cry.

New Mombasa Police Precinct 13

The ODST troopers stared open mouthed at the sight. Sergeant Haer hurried over.

"Lt. Baker, by the Emperor, what's happening?!"

Baker stood open mouthed. "That frakking alien genocidal maniac is going to jump inside the city!"

The weight of his words were horrifying in their implication. Sergeant Haer turned to face his brother-in-arms. "What can we do?"

Behar Tzavaras placed his hand on Haer's shoulder. "What we can."

Behar reached deep into the Warp and gathered every bit of power he could. As he reached into the Immaterium to fuel his psychic gifts, he reached into the collective knowledge of those who had created him so long ago. He had protected humanity too long to fail now. Tzavaras would allow no unwitting alien to grant the Dark Gods of Chaos ultimate victory in the long war. Power radiated off him as light radiates off the sun. In one moment of glory, all was engulfed in light.

12. Chapter 12

Unknown Space

Halo. It is a beautiful terror, a well known secret. Halo is considered the harbinger of the end by some and the salvation of all to others. The Sword of the Forerunners is magnificent and loathsome all at once. Halo is a paradox.

The Rings are also the linchpin of the galaxy. Whoever controls Halo controls the fate of the entire Milky Way.

The Fortress World, one of the Installation's many names and epitaphs, stood as a serene sentry over the world the Covenant named _Substance_.

Suddenly, the serenity was shattered. The Slipspace rupture created by the arrival of the Prophet of Regret's battered flagship. The Covenant vessel was a wounded beast and debris from the destruction of New Mombassa milled around it like flies.

Among the flies, the _In Amber Clad_ drifted in the void.

"Status!" Miranda Keyes stated as calmly as possible under the circumstances.

"We're drifting ma'am. Engine cores have spun to zero."

"Get them back..." Then, she saw it. Emotions washed over Commander Keyes like a wave. Awe, fear, curiosity, hate... All were mixed evenly in her mind. In this moment, she felt a connection to her father.

"Cortana... What is that?"

Cortana's voice was firm as she spoke. "That, commander, is another Halo."

In the bowels of the _In Amber Clad_, Sergeant Johnson coughed on the smoke of his cigar. "Say What!"

His memories of Alpha Halo were still clear. The nightmares were as vivid as ever.

Brother-Captain Thomas connected his Power Armor's viewscreens to the main network of the _In Amber Clad_.

"This Halo, it is a weapon?"

Cortana's voice was grim. "One that could scour all life from the Galaxy... The Covenant has deluded itself into believing that activating the Rings will allow them entrance into some sort of paradise."

Commander Keyes chimed in. "We have to stop Regret from activating Halo. Captain Thomas, can your subordinates fit into one of our drop pods?"

"I have no subordinates, Commander. My fellow Marines are my brothers. Your Drop Pods are large enough to carry us, but we will not be able to bring our heavy weapons with us."

John-117 joined the conversation. "Captain Thomas, could the weapons

fit in their own HEV?"

Brother Azarius nodded. "The Spartan's plan sounds reasonable. On your order, Brother-Captain, I can load our weapons."

"Make it so." Captain Thomas then turned his focus to Commander Keyes. "The Imperial Fists are prepared to serve along side you."

Installation 06 Phase Pulse Generator Alpharius

Blood flowed from the desecrated corpses of the Word Bearer's slaves. The unfortunates had been arranged in an eight pointed star and slaughtered by the arcane magicks of Lucilia. Hakim and his Word Bearers stood off to the side watching the ritual. Even as the Aspiring Champion bathed in the glorious energies of Chaos, he found himself hating the Sorceress. She is not Astartes. That one thought circulated in his head over and over and over again.

Lucy took a deep breath and exhaled the excess Warp Energy that had built up within her. She had funneled as much into her as possible to fuel the advancement of Tzeentch's gifts as her mortal shell could handle. It was also a way to attempt to lessen her annoyance. That Khornate buffoon's mental chant of 'She is not Astartes' was growing increasingly annoying. She really wished he would give into the mindless rage of the Blood God already and attack her. He can't make all that mental screeching after Lucilia reduces him to a gibbering Chaos Spawn or a charred corpse.

"The Ritual is done. Brother Hakim, this place has been sanctified for the glory of the Dark Gods."

Hakir looked around as the eldritch lights faded away. The Forerunner facility was no longer the gleaming and nearly surgically sterile chamber it once was, instead, the walls resembled human skin and the support pillars resembled a material that may or may not have been human bone. The floors pulsed and changed paths if one walked or stared at them too long. Fleshy growths rose from the ground and ensared the slaves and drained them of blood and their other fluids. Only the Astartes and the witch remained.

Hakir approved. "Excellent work, witch. Now, ****Blood for the Blood God!****" Hakim drew his power ax and charged.

Lucilia sighed and removed her Force Halberd from its position on her back. It's about time. The former Spartan-III thought gleefully. Maybe now the inane mental chatter would stop.

Control Room of Installation 06

Eliphas the Inheritor sung his praises to the Dark Gods in the Daemonic Lexican. The Prophet of Disdain stared blankly at his hands as they bled. What had he done? How could he be aiding these humans?

First Acolyte Iulianus waited until his master finished his holy incantation. "My Apostle, the ritual purification of the Phase Pulse Generators has been completed. We can proceed with the main ritual at any time."

The Dark Apsolte's eyes slowly opened. "Excellent. Bring the Key of Souls and the Guide."

Coryphaus Aelous grinned as he grabbed the horrified alien 'Prophet'. Iulianus bowed low as he handed the Index to Eliphas. Warp Energy began to flicker across the Index as Eliphas began a low drumming chant.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" A shrill feminine voice yelled. Instinctively, the Dark Apostle's retinue formed a defensive circle around their master.

A glowing orb floated down from somewhere in the vaulted ceiling of the Control Room.

Disdain spurted out blood as he whispered 'the Oracle'. Iulianus sneered at the interloper. The hulking form of Coryphaus Aelous took a thunderous step forward and his Power Fail hissed to life.

"Ah, the Siren, so good of you to join us for this glorious moment."

The Monitor rotated and analyzed the collection of powered armored soldiers. "Siren? I am 16807 Contrite Divergence, monitor of Installation 06. I must inform you that your actions have resulted in a catastrophic error in the functions of this Installation! You are ordered to cease your meddling _at once! _If you stop your interference now, I may be able to return functionality to acceptable parameters withing 4235.7 cycles. You must und..."

A series of thuds rang out and explosions wracked the AI's shell. The Inheritor lowered his bolt pistol and growled. Disdain turned towards the Chaos Lord and stared in disbelief for a moment. It was only a moment as he went blind upon staring at the darkness radiating off the Astartes.

"That was the Oracle, Apostle."

"No, xenos, it was the Siren. A false prophet meant to lead the faithful astray. We can waste no more time! Holy Lorgar awaits!"

As the wreckage of 16807 Contrite Divergence fell into the depths, the baleful chanting of the Word Bearers and the screams of the Prophet of Disdain echoed endlessly.

Ruins of New Mombasa

_Sanctus Hadrianus _stood impossibly on the outskirts of Bamburi. Around the God Machine's feet, thousands of UNSC and Imperial troops stood trembling alongside countless civilians. They trembled, not in awe of the great and terrible war engine, but at the fact that they were alive. Regret's escape from Earth had completely eradicated the city of New Mombasa. The energies released Slipspace jump had completely vaporized the entire island down to several hundred meters. By all accounts, the blast wave should have kept going. By all accounts over a million humans should have been utterly destroyed.

They were not and at the center of it all sat the being commonly known as Behar Tzavaras. He sat cross-legged on the ground breathing

deeply from the exhaustion of making use of so much of his power so quickly.

Lt. Cameron Baker gulped. "Doc... Who exactly are you?" The scientist smiled as he looked up at the soldier.

"I am what I have always been. I am the door that separates the souls of our species from the storm of the Immaterium."

And through it all, Sergeant Haer simply repeated a prayer in High Gothic over and over again.

Erik Li hobbled out from the Chimera he had been in. Commissar Bostic and General Sturnn followed closely behind. Their hands were on their sidearms in case the Ruinous Powers had corrupted the Psyker.

"I have felt this before! The warmth... Oh the warmth!"

"It cannot be..." The usually bombastic Commissar was reduced to whispers. Among the soldiers and civilians was a giant of a man wearing golden power armor.

Father Brahae made the sign of the Aquilla. "The Emperor..."

General Sturnn heard murmurs all around him. Some people were mentioning deities of various pre-Imperium faiths and others were calling out for their parents or loved ones.

Behar looked out over the devastation wrought by the Covenant. "It is too soon. It is all too soon."

High Charity, Covenant Holy City

The Prophet of Truth stared idly as the Prophet of Deception delivered his report on the progression of their valiant attempts to restore the Covenant. There had been many unexpected and trying consequences of the crusade against the humans. One of the most troubling for the Hierarchs and the lesser Prophets was the increasing autonomy of the Sangheli.

"My agents have eliminated an illegal Sangheli weapons depository. We left no trace. Our... _drones_ proved most effective in avoiding the sensors."

The Prophet of Truth looked at his 'opposite' and nodded. "The vessels stationed at the depository?"

"Sadly, we had to destroy them. However, our stealth generators proved effective and the communications codes you provided allowed us to _contain_ the situation silently. You will have your purge, Noble Truth and it will be on your terms not those of the Sangheli."

Truth motioned with his hand. "I am glad you carried out your mission so quickly. There was a moment following the Arbiter's safe return that there might have been a complication with your mission."

Deception steepled his fingers. "You have nothing to fear, Hierarch..." Not Yet... "My forces were deployed the moment I received your signal during the trial of K'xon Rtau."

Truth clinched his fist. "And lo, did the Path of the Great Journey reveal itself. You are dismissed."

The Prophet of Deception rose to his feet and bowed low. He left in silence and Truth was left with the nagging feeling that he had just unleashed death upon the galaxy.

Sangheli Supply Outpost 309

The Sangheli fire team secured the second interior . There was no lighting operating and an unknown type of interference was preventing their in-built imaging systems from functioning. Councilor N'gyven stood at the center of the formation and gazed around the chamber. There was something wrong here on multiple levels.

"Councilor, the jamming has just intensified. We cannot contact our ships."

"A clever trap. They did not reveal that anything at this facility was amiss until we had deployed into the facility. Prepare for war brothers."

The Elites fanned out in a defensive formation and the Hunter Pair of Silura and Kilura Vadec Jaolac took point. Their armored bulk and powerful assault cannons forming a bulwark against any enemy.

A scene from the worst of charnel houses greeted them. The bodies of the fallen defenders had been impaled on some sort of eight spoked wheel.

"By the Forerunners... What is this blasphemy?" One of the Elites breathed.

"**We have come for you!" **A harsh whisper filled the room. The sound seemingly flowed like water and it was impossible to pin down the sound's origin. Suddenly, an explosion tore into one of the Elites. The impact of the shell alone dropped his shields. Armor crumpled against the force of the explosion and shrapnel tore into his chest. He was dead before he hit the ground.

All around the Elites, massive armored figures detached themselves from the shadows. The had wing-like attachments literally growing from their helmets.

Councilor N'gyven activated his pair of Plasma Swords. "FOR SANGHELIOS!"

For a moment, it appeared as if the armored figures were leering at the Sangheli. "***Ave Dominus Nox.**"

The Hunters roared and fired their assault cannons at the attackers. They missed. The pair turtled behind their shields and advanced towards the target of their ire. Elsewhere, Elites were falling to fire from the armored monsters. Councilor N'gyven had entered the facility with more than three score of his brothers. One third of his soldiers were already dead. Though with the element of surprise passed, the Elites were achieving some semblance of parity. Plasma rifles were not seeming to have much effect on the armored suits of the enemy. Ironically, the Needler was proving effective at hitting the gaps in the enemy's formidable power armor. An enemy soldier fell

to a monsoon of Needler fire. Blood poured from his wounds, but even in his death throes, he managed to surge forward one last time and stab the closest Elite.

Councilor N'gyven's Honor Blades were proving the most effective. They were able to damage the enemy's plate armor. Even as he was tearing into his foe, the councilor was in the fight of his life. The giant was attacking him with a massive physical sword that used hundreds of razor teeth on a rotary belt to inflict damage. Councilor N'gyven had no illusions that his enhanced energy shields would only stand up to a single good blow. If one of his brothers was hit by that chainsword... Despite it all, his blood was singing. It had been far too long since he waged war as a proper Sangheli. This battle would be worthy of addition into his line's Battle Poem.

A miss! The attacker swung in haste and had exposed a gap between his shoulder and helmet. N'gyven struck with the fury of the fallen and stabbed deep into his foe. The head fell to ground with a audible thunk. The Sangheli howled.

An armored giant was reduced to cinders by a blast from a Hunter's assault cannon. N'gyven's elation would have to wait. The dull thud of a grenade detonation tore apart another Sangheli. Then, the enemy's equivalent of a Sangheli Ranger dropped from the vaulted ceiling. His armored clawed feet crushed the chest of a wounded Elite. The soldier with features like a predatory bird aimed an obviously ancient weapon at the exposed stomach of Kilura. The weapon fired a beam of pure rage given form and the Mgalekgolo was cut in half. All the Lekgolo worms hit by the beam were reduced to vapor.

In that moment, Silura went mad. The telepathic death scream of its bond brother/mate reverberating in it's consciousness would not stop. Silura impaled the nearest target, which thankfully, was an enemy. Blood washed over the armor and for the briefest of moments blocked the ever present coursing energy on the monster's armor. The Lekgolo tossed it's target aside. There was a deafening crunch as the warrior impacted into a far wall. N'gyven rolled out the way of the berserk beast and thrust his sword into the back of the lord of night that was attacking a wounded Sangheli. A second stab and slice removed the warrior's head.

The jump packer made a second pass. He slapped a magnetic canister into the vulnerable back of the Hunter. The explosion erased the Lekgolo worms that formed the giant warrior form. Even the normally invincible armor of the Hunter glowed with insane heat and some areas, those closest to the bomb, actually warped.

As the swooping predator attempted to leap away, N'gyven lashed out with his swords. In a stroke of incredible luck, he managed to sever the control lines of the jump pack. The enemy lost control spectacularly and exploded when he hit the wall at several hundred miles per hour.

Then, the guns fell silent. It was over. The Sangheli councilor surveyed the room with a weariness he had not felt in decades.

Nine. They only had nine warriors. We arrived with forty Sangheli and a Hunter pair. Only eleven remain and only five of us will walk

out of this field under our own power..._

"Collect our honored dead. We will give them proper rites." N'gyven was answered only with silent, weary nods.

In Amber Clad

"Three. Two. One. Drop!"

The voice was distant and tiny in John's ears. He felt, rather than heard, the magnetic locks disengaging from the Human Entry Vehicle. The rumble of Halo's artificial atmosphere and the effects of its gravity caused a rhythmic rumble to roll over his drop pod. Cortana's counting off the distance before hitting the drop target added another layer of strangely hectic calm to the drop.

A jarring snag shook the HEV. The drag chute had deployed and detached. Impact was imminent.

If Cortana had not been interfacing directly with the Spartan's neural implants, he would have never had heard her shout about the incoming Covenant anti-air fire. John and Cortana knew that the drop was coming too fast for the limited reflexes of the Jackals and Grunts manning the Shades to compensate. The speed was so great only the incredible reflexes of a SPARTAN, Space Marine or Sangheli could even hope to get a lucky hit on a Drop Pod assault.

Debris scattered from the impact site. As the hatches were blown clear by the charges, John grabbed a submachine gun.

"**Can we make any more noise?!**" Cortana shouted over the hissing of the Shades, the crash of drop pods and the barking of the Astarte's bolters. Master Chief then grabbed a rocket launcher.

In the distance, Brother Rhys roared. "**Primarch-Progenitor, to your glory and the glory of Him on earth! **"

Cortana sighed. "I guess not. Oh well, _Get'em Chief!_"

It was evident that the Shade cannons had to be the primary objective. John noticed with a mixed amusement and worry that the Covenant had placed smaller plasma cannons around the Shades to cover them. Had they really taken that much of a beating in New Mombasa?

A small pack of Grunts advanced around one of the rocky outcrops. Chief simply tossed a frag grenade into the group. He ignored the pieces of alien that rained down upon him as he rushed for cover. Plasma fire from the Shades and plasma cannons was impacting all around him.

As Chief surveyed the battlefield, he noticed that a fire team of ODS laying suppressing fire on one of the plasma cannons. The hulking form of Brother Azarius emerged from cover and leveled _his_ Plasma Cannon. There was a roar as the massive energy weapon fired. As the blast hit home, the Shade and it's crew simply vanished. The heat wave of the expanding orb of plasma seared the surrounding Covenant cannon fodder. The shrieking of Grunts were added to the symphony of battle.

Chief took advantage of the momentary confusion in the enemy's forces

to leap onto the rock formation in front of him. A Kig-yar stared slack jawed as the half-ton of MJOLNIR armor crashed down a few feet from his location. Before the xenos could react, a burst of fire splattered his head onto the Covenant heavy weapon. The SPARTAN-II backhanded a Grunt that got too close. He dropped his M7 and aimed his rocket launcher.

The Shade exploded in a satisfyingly extravagant manner. John barely dodged the attack by the Elite. As the human rolled to the side, the Sangheli roared. Master Chief grabbed his submachine gun and jabbed it in between the Elite's mandibles. Cortana made a snide comment about Chief making salsa out of the Elite. However, John was so focused on the fight that he couldn't catch the exact wording. In the distance, Brother Ioannes had just reduced the final Shade to scrap with a well placed Krak grenade and was pouring bolt fire into a huddling mass of Grunts.

"Nice work, Chief. The landing zone is clear." Cortana's voice was crisp.

John nodded unnecessarily. "That was quick. Reinforcements on the way?"

"Damn right they are!" Johnson's voice interrupted. Above the secured Landing Zone, a Pelican disgorged a number of UNSC marines and a Warthog.

Cortana was about to speak again, when Commander Keyes' broke into the comm channel. "Captain Thomas. We may have a problem. One of our scout flights discovered what they believe to be a crashed organic ship."

The Space Marine's voice became harsh. "Tyranids."

Miranda took a deep breath. "That isn't the full problem. The Hornet flight confirmed a large number of Flood headed towards the ship. Captain, I need to know. Is that Tyranid ship capable of Faster-than-light travel?"

The Astartes motioned for his brothers as he responded. "No. However, Tyranid vessels can travel at incredible speeds within real space. They also cast a Shadow in the Warp which prevents our version of Faster than Light travel and communications."

Cortana's voice hid a hint of annoyance after getting bumped out of the conversation, but she concealed it well. "We can't let the Flood assimilate that ship. If they get off this Ring, they'll multiply exponentially and we won't be able to stop them. That Tyranid has to die."

"Understood, Cortana. Brother-Captain, I'm sending a Pelican with a nuclear weapon to your location."

"Very well, commander."

Cortana redirected the conversation. "There, I've located Regret. He can't keep his mouth shut and is broadcasting on nearly every frequencies. Regret is in a fairly impressive temple-complex a few clicks from our position. If I was a megalomaniac, **and I'm not**, that's where I'd be."

John walked over towards the Warthog. "Sure you aren't, Cortana. I've got the gun."

Everything proceeded normally for a moment before Cortana shouted out. "_Did you just make a __**joke?!**_****"

Medusa System, Ultima Segmentum

Inquisitor Acelia's previous doubts about Lord General Nuliez's enthusiasm for the prospects of conquering the other galaxy had evaporated. There had to be at least fifty vessels dedicated to the first wave ready to defend their lost cousins the UNSC and bring them into the Emperor's Light. Acelia was very pleased to see a pair of battleships, an _Emperor-class_ and an _Oberon-class_. At the extreme ranges, she could not make out the proud ships' names. Maybe when they got within the spiting distance of a few hundred thousand kilometers, she would be able to use the magnification of her pict-screen to make out such details.

It was impossible to hide her enthusiasm. The freshly minted inquisitor knew that some of her more jaded colleagues in the Ordo Xenos mocked or even despised her 'youthful' enthusiasm and Puritan positions. However, the opinions of her associates were inconsequential next to the sheer glee she experienced at the thought of an entire second galaxy in which she could kill aliens and populate with good, honest Imperial humans.

Acelia was torn from her observations by Inquisitor Agmar clearing his throat. "I hope you are not getting melancholy like your mentor, Leyland so often did before his missions."

"I was actually thinking of the opportunities for the Imperium in this new galaxy."

Agmar activated the view-port's magnification. "So unlike your mentor."

The young inquisitor noticed a hint of a smile on the old man's face. Acelia ran her fingers along a groove in the wall. "Part of me thinks that's why he inducted me as an acolyte. Sir, if I may, where is Lord Gathos?"

Trireus Agmar chuckled. Acelia could never stop refering to that melancholy man as 'Lord Gathos'. Then again, it was to be expected as Leyland had filled the void in Acelia left by her biological families slaughter by a Yhaas raiding party when she was an child.

"I believe he is in the Ackras sub-sector hunting down a Genestealer infestation."

Acelia rubbed her hands together. The Ackras subsector was directly in the path of one of the major tendrils of Hive Leviathan that hadn't been drawn into the Octavius system by Kryptman's Gambit. The thought of Leyland, the person who had given Acelia her name and her purpose, facing a Tendril of Leviathan was worrying.

"He will succeed, as we will." She quickly changed the subject. "You seem tired Trireus."

The ancient Inquisitor groaned and rubbed his temples. "I've been dealing with the Kronus situation. The Guard and the Vindicare Temples are up in arms over that little incident involving the Eldar."

Acelia raised an eyebrow. "What incident?"

"Evidently, Vindicare operative number 54 from Temple 1 'liberated' Farseer Taldeer from the Imperial Guard holding facility in the Vandean Coast. Needless to say, this is problematic as both the Guard and the Assassin Temples want this pair executed as messily as possible."

"I don't see why, Trireus. The operative is a heretic and this Taldeer is a xenos. Killing them shouldn't be a problem."

Trireus shook his head. "It's not that simple. Ulthwe wants their Farseer back. We don't want to enter open conflict with Ulthwe, not while we are staying out of each other's way fighting off the remnants of the Despoiler's last Black Crusade."

Acelia nodded like a Schola juvie who had just missed a glaringly obvious question. The elder Ordo Xenos inquisitor laughed.

"Enough about business."

Again, Acelia merely nodded and Trireus continued to speak. "My dear, you should really consider taking a familial name. Every human needs at least two names. I'd suggest that you take Gathos, but I doubt you'd do that."

The woman blushed a bit. "I couldn't do that, but you're right I guess."

"Of course I'm right. It's written in the regulations right before it says the same thing about Commissars."

Control Room of Installation 06

The Index had changed. Through the Warp Sorcery of Eliphas and his retinue, it had merged with the Prophet of Disdain and grown to the size of a Tau Firewarrior. The Prophet of Disdain still lived, his form stretched and fused to the Icon. Aeolus found the alien's constant screams of pure agony most enjoyable.

The ritual had also fully transformed the Installation's control room. The air was thick and cold. Reality shimmered, bent and occasionally tore all around them. Daemons, servants of the Dark Gods, fought greedily with each other to squeeze through the shuddering slits between the Immaterium and the Materium. A cascade of a silky liquid-energy poured from holes that used to be illuminators. The substance flowed into a greedy maw that was once a circular chasm of unknown purpose. The maw had diseased lips and thousands of blade-like brass teeth. It spoke in a thousand voices whispering the secret desires of all those present.

A giant Eight Pointed Star had replaced the massive hologram of the Installation. The central hologram of the world Halo orbited had been transmuted into a writhing sphere of pure warp energy. Inside, an infinite number of possibilities extended into nothing and mated to

create even more possibilities. The walkway the Chaos Marines stood on was of flesh and constantly repositioned itself. Aeolus and Ramaius hefted the ever bleeding, ever screaming Index as Kentarus, Iulianus and Eliphas began to drone an incantation.

The five score Daemons that had forced their way through into the womb-like control room grew ever more eager to create a permanent conduit between the two diametrically opposed realms. The Pink Horrors of Tzeentch added their sorcerous talents to the spell, while the Plaguebearers of Nurgle cheered on the Word Bearers in a dull monotone. Fierce Bloodletters of Khorne could not contain their excitement and began to butcher each other in earnest. Every drop of blood spilt in the name of Khorne would speed the process. Ethereal and lithe female forms caressed the power armored warriors and urged them to finish their holy task and awake the handmaidens of the Young Prince into full existence.

The Word Bearers reached the control console. The Forerunner construct stubbornly remained untainted. However, even it's strong machine spirit could not hold against the corruption for long, especially after the scions of Lorgar stabbed the Corrupted Icon into the panel.

Reality burned and froze. The tenuous hold of reality perished in ecstatic agony. The giant Eight-pointed star spasmed as the infinite possibilites and energy flowed like fluid and stood as firm and immovable as the void. The taste of blood.

A flash of light visible as far away as High Charity awoke a madness of beautiful and hideous order. Hunter forms grew at an uncontrollable rate and choked entire hallways of the Covenant's holy city. Deep in the region of space known to the Imperium as the Eastern Fringe, the souls a primitive Savannah dwelling species panicked at, embraced, drank, rejoiced in, withdrew from, hated, recoiled and loved the birth cries of the mighty Warp Storm all at once. The strain on their being was so great, that they somehow managed to bury all traces of their souls in the Immaterium. They greedily hid their presence from the predators that split forth.

On the human world of Rhodes, half man half bird creatures were born from the vast fields of wheat and blotted out the light of the now pastel green sun. The population was overtaken by madness as a rift in the veil of existence was shredded. A horde of disgustingly beautiful dancers egged on by equine giants rushed forward eager to exalt in the experience of simply existing. The smell of incense.

Roses spoke to each other and animals bloomed like fleshy plants. Silver became black and sounds fled from a dozen worlds.

Djakarta and Ator vomited forward a bounty of Father Nurgle's gifts into sacs of Sangheli skin. They would make wonderful grenades. The texture of a tumor.

Clean filth and crooked right angles sprang up in the city of Lima, Peru. They were stamped out by the strong presence of the being both feared, loved, despised and envied by the self-appointed masters of the Warp.

On Sanghelios, a maddened crowd stormed the Jiralhanae garrison and

butchered the entire contingent. As their fore bearers often did, the Elites took the bottom jaws of each of the enemy and burned them. The corpses were stacked high. The sound of fear.

Every inch of space within 2,500 light years Of Halo 06 ceased to begin. The raw stuff of Chaos raced out from the Installation. Some worlds were torn apart by the emotional energy and their debris became living creatures of impossible design. Other worlds were morphed and became the playground of Warp beings. However, two changes stood head and shoulders above the rest. Slaanesh, the Dark Prince of Pleasure, took his seat alongside his brothers. The fourth Ruinous Power had been fully born.

The second change was that a dozen world vomited forth from the 41st Millennium. The worlds of Sicarus, Ghalmek, Tya'woi'ik and others phased into the Milky Way's first Warp Overlay. Dozens of warships, thousand of lesser vessels and even a handful of Space Hulks plied the currents between the worlds.

The Word Bearers had arrived in full.

In the Control Room, the festering heart of the Tempest, the orb of Chaos peeled like an orange and formed a stairway. A giant swathed in crimson armor and daemonic visage descended the walkway.

"Well, done my sons. Chaos shall bless you for your glorious actions."

Lorgar, Daemon-Primarch of the Word Bearers, smiled. Victory was within his taloned grasp.

13. Chapter 13

Installation 05

A veritable carpet of Flood Infection Forms scuttled across the broken and tortured surface. The flora of Halo had exploded into an unnatural growth spurt. Everywhere, shadows danced in the mist as the Flood found themselves in an unusual position.

They were being hunted.

The controlling intelligence of the Flood found it highly amusing. The Combat Forms formed up on the flanks to deter the stalking predators. It only served to provoke the creatures. Granted, the Flood had anticipated this and all the Combat forms were equipped with the Sentinel beams. These weapons would be sufficient. When the charge came, the Flood's initial assessment appeared correct. The Sentinel beam projectors held a constant stream of fire on the scythe armed warrior forms. A large number of the enemy fell to the steady and unwavering fire of the Flood. However, a handful of the creatures made it into assault range.

It was in the brutal and desperate close attacks that these creatures, known to the observing Space Marines as Hormagaunts, thrived. The small front line Tyranid bio-forms hacked the closet combat forms. Once again, the Flood had expected this and countered with a commandeered Covenant Spectre. Plasma fire from the heavy cannon finished off the remaining Hormagaunts.

One of the observing Space Marine aimed his heavy weapon and was prepared to fire when his commander shook him off. It wouldn't be prudent to reveal their presence yet. Especially considering what was coming.

A large brood of Tyranid Warriors leapt onto the wreckage of a number of Enforcer drones. A smothering psychic presence almost as violent and powerful as the recent surge of energy from the Other Realm drew the full attention of the Flood. The Gravemind, father, master and soul of the Flood deigned to turn his attention to it.

Once again, I am impressed. But are you foe or are you friend?

You are prey.

The Gravemind had never felt such an overwhelming desire to consume. Even its own never-ending hunger paled next to the endless urge to feed in the other presence. The Gravemind realized he must reevaluate his assessment of these creatures. There were an acceptable number of Combat Forms on this Installation and the newest arrivals had so thoughtfully brought equipment his children could capture and use against this new threat.

A new corpse shall join the tomb _and a stronger Flood shall bloom!_

The levees broke. Countless Infection forms scuttled forward and Combat Forms disengaged from their millennium long war with the Sentinels and moved to destroy the arrogant new enemy. The Gravemind redirected thousands of combat and carrier forms away from the main lines of the skirmish against the Remnants of the Forerunners. This foe would feel the full fury of the Flood! Pure Forms would be emerging from the newly formed cocoons soon. The time for skirmishes was over. It was time for the Flood to go to war.

The Tyranid Hive Mind had no concept of war. It had no concept of hate. Only hunger and the eternally futile quest to sate it's hunger drove it onwards. The Prey was resisting. Thus, it must be subdued. Gill-like structures on the downed Hive Ship spasmed as they opened wide. Thousands upon thousands of Gaunts and a living carpet of Rippers flowed out of the massive ship like blood from a wound.

The Hive Mind assessed the disembarkation and noted that it was unusually inefficient. However, this was somewhat expected. The Tyranids' arrival had been... traumatic. The Hive Ship had been dragged through the Aether against its will and without the aid of a Genestealer Chorus to direct it's migration. The arrival had been painful, as the majority of the Hive Ship had been buried under the thin crust of this artificial world. Pain was temporary and irrelevant. The Norn Queen lived.

One of the Tyranid Warriors fired it's Barbed Strangler. The seed projectile reached full maturity before it hit the ground. In a moment, sentient vines ensnared, crushed and tore apart the hapless Flood that were within the radius. The Flood were immune to the shock that would have crippled most other enemies. Instead, the Flood pressed the attack. A pair of captured Covenant Ghosts rushed forward spitting plasma. A few of the Tyranid Warriors collapsed under the

fire, but the Warrior next to the fallen screeched and launched a bio-plasma reprisal. The explosion gutted the jet bike. A moment later, thousands of Rippers and Infection forms collided with each other. In a terrifying heartbeat later, the ground exploded upwards and a brood of Raveners tore into a dozen Sangheli Combat Forms.

Two of the greatest threats to the continued existence of the entirety of the Milky Way were at war.

Pious Inquisitor

Richard rose to his feet and surveyed the carnage around him. Mounds of dead, Sangheli, Human, Grunt, and even a number of Jackals were piled five deep throughout the secondary gravity well chamber. The sudden surge of Warp Energy had unleashed a blind berserker fury in his men and the Covenant aliens who had discovered them. The bloodlust of Khorne had impaired their normal mindset catastrophically as none of the aliens had called for reinforcements. Instead, all of the assembled sentients had fallen upon each other. Even the usually cowardly Uggnoy had torn each other apart. The lesser aliens, Jackals and Grunts, had died quickly. Moments after the wild bloodletting had erupted, only Sangheli and Humans remained. _For a moment_.

Then _they_ arrived. Servants of Khorne tore through the weakened veil separating Material and Immaterial planes. Khorne's daemonic headhunters recognized their own. An even greater madness gripped the Covenant Elites, but their bestial fury paled in comparison to the children of Khorne.

Richard and his surviving soldiers, no Berserkers as all semblance of martial discipline had long since been abandoned, surged out of the holding chamber. The human slaves of Khorne struggled to keep pace with the Daemons. Except for Richard.

Despite the fact that an incredible amount of soldiers had died on Earth and disembarked for the surface of Halo, there were hundreds perhaps thousands, still on the ship. They melted before the furious onslaught of the Khornate warriors. Forty of Richard's Berserkers broke off from the main group and captured the Covenant Drop Pods. The Colonel smiled. They may be charging into the maws of death, but Khorne cares not from whom the blood flows so long as it flows.

The Daemonic Host and numerous mortal warriors continued to butcher their way towards the ship's bridge.

"**Blood for the Blood God!**"

Ship Master Oliak Krasinee activated his energy sword as the final preparations were readied for the inevitable arrival of the humans and their demonic cohorts. The Ship Master had never seen such fury, not even among the beast Jiralhanae. It sickened him. The report delivered by the Grunt Yutob was horrifyingly accurate. Oliak realized that there had been part of him that had hoped the Uggnoy had typically been exaggerating the horror of this new foe. By the Rings, the small one had _understated_ the horror of these abominations. Oliak now knew what it was to look upon madness.

"Madness? I will show you _madness..._"

A giant avian monstrosity leered at the assembled Covenant. The Hunter pair assigned to protect the Ship Master charged the newest demon to infest the _Pious Inquisitor._ The Greater Daemon of Tzeentch simply took a deep breath.

The Hunters vanished.

The creature impossibly smiled. "Well, time to let those barbarians in. We can't having them butting their heads against the door for the next few days now can we?"

The Lord of Change flicked his wrist and the reinforced door opened against the will of the ship's AI. Richard was the first through the breach, surprising even the Tzeentchian Daemon.

"**What is a pawn of the trickster god doing here?!**" One of the Bloodletters barked.

"I am here because our goals overlap, barbarian." The Daemon materialized a scroll of some sort of skin. "Even your ilk must be aware of the latest treaty?"

The largest of the Bloodletters growled. "**Yes, we can't go back to killing your kind until we wipe out the Sangheli and Humans.**"

Oliak stared mutely at the exchange. Mostly because some sorcery had silenced him and that fact that he was bleeding out of his mandibles, but honest surprise had something to do with it. The Greater Daemon pinched the sides of his beak with two massive taloned fingers.

"_I will not hit them with a Bolt of Change. I will not hit them with a Bolt of Change._"

Richard spat in the direction of the Daemon. "We can hear you imbecile."

The outburst from the mere mortal caught the Daemons off guard.

"Be wary of your position, _human_. Only your favor with a number of the Blood God's servants prevents me from unleashing my ire against you." The Lord of Change leered, but suddenly his voice changed. "I am here to insure that his ship becomes the property of Chaos. Other than that, I will not interfere. Feel free to do... whatever you barbarians do."

Oliak stumbled as the Lord of Change's sorcery dissipated. The Uggnoy fled, or in some cases, killed themselves. However, the Elites were made of sterner stuff and charged the horrific enemy even as their eyes bled and their minds unraveled. The Ship Master ignited his Plasma sword and stepped forward as the human warrior pushed aside a headless Elite corpse.

"**Blood for the Blood God!**" The human shouted spraying blood laced spittle.

"Victory for Sanghelios!" Oliak Krasinee roared back. The two warriors rushed forward in a maddened charge. Richard sidestepped the vicious Plasma sword attack and countered with a full body tackle.

The Sangheli was stunned more from the fact that Richard knocked him to the ground than the actual blow. Oliak lashed out with an elbow and broke Richard's nose. However, the Khorne worshiper ignored the pain and smashed the Elite Ship Master with his submachine gun.

The Bloodletters were quickly eliminating the remaining ship guards. In their unending desire for battle, they turned on each other. Blood sprayed upon the elegant bridge of the alien vessel as one by one the material shells of the Daemons were shattered. The final Bloodletter circled the continuing melee between the human and the Sangheli.

Krasinee had the advantage in strength and managed to knock himself clear of his foe. The short vicious fight had left him battered. That insane human! He had managed to tear off a piece of Oliak's armor! The Elite staggered as he picked up his Honor Blade.

Then, a shrieking mechanical sound filled the bridge. "You should kill your opponent before turning your back!"

Oliak whirled around and his eyes went wide as Richard lunged forward. The Sangheli made an attempt to block the wild swing. And failed.

Skalletjuv tore through the Elite's neck in an instant. The head fell to the ground with an audible thunk. The Bloodletter nodded at the mortal and roared.

Richard charged.

Outskirts of the Medusa System, Imperial Navy Security Cordon

The _Penitent Warden, _the Battle Barge that served as the Lamentor's Fortress Monastery, dwarfed the Imperial Navy _Cobra_-class escorts docked at the Ramilies Star Fort guarding the Anomaly. A steady stream of ships had been arriving for the past standard day. The largest of the vessels were not the Grand Cruisers and Battleships of the Imperial Navy or even the fearsome Battle Barges and Strike Cruisers of the Adeptus Astartes. The largest of the many behemoths gathered in the graveyard of the Medusa system were the transport ships ferrying the millions upon millions of Imperial Guardsmen to the embattled territories of the United Nations Space Command. However, there was another set of vessels that rivaled the transports in size. These star faring ships were not as welcomed as the troopships though.

The Inquisition had brought a significant number of colony ships. Each vessel was filled to the brim with civilians, mainly refugees from the Hives of Medusa V and citizens displaced by the predations of Hive Fleet Leviathan. In total, there were nearly _two hundred million civilians_.

Reaction among the Adeptus Astartes and the Imperial Guard and Navy were decidedly negative. The Inquisition, as was their normal inclination, had declined to inform the soldiers of the Imperium of the additions to the Crusade. Of all the reactions, Lord Solar Hosea Gorran was the angriest and most drastic. The moment he had discovered the number of civilians the Emperor's Inquisition had brought along, he 'requested' that the Commissariat began conscripting every able bodied soldier.

"If they are old and healthy enough make them Guardsmen! If they're too young, then give them the option of being Whiteshields!"

His order, given in the middle of a joint briefing with the Space Marines, earned him a great deal of respect from the Celestial Lions and the Knight Brothers of Kadesh. The action also had the effect of adding an additional seven million soldiers to the Crusade's forces. The sudden and unexpected conscription combined with the short transit would not allow them to be adequately trained for front-line duty. They would, however, make passable support troops and a useful training for the freshly graduated Commissars.

The first wave of the Anomaly Crusade was a powerful, if hastily assembled, fighting force. The Imperial Navy had managed to gather two dozen of the ubiquitous _Lunar-class _cruisers from various fleets to supplement the half dozen _Lunar _cruisers released to the Crusade at Kar Duniash. Other classes of cruisers; _Gothic, Tyrants _and even _Dominators _were present. The Cruisers were dwarfed by the gigantic Battle Cruisers, Grand Cruisers and the pair of Battle Ships. All around the capital ships, squadrons of Light Cruisers and Escorts flitted through the system on patrol.

The Adeptus Mechanicus stood apart from their fellow humans, literally and figuratively. The Tech Priests of Mars had formed a defensive perimeter around the two monolithic Forge Ships and the Cathedral Carriers that housed the Titan Legions seconded to the Crusade.

Arc-Magos Yes! Gho intoned the Litany of Access for the communique Magos Michel had sent from the UNSC. If Gho's heart had still been organic and if the Arc-Magos hadn't set aside his emotions for the calculating perfection of the Mechanical, it would have leapt out of his chest. The somewhat eccentric Magos, nearly all explorer Magi were, had reaffirmed his standing as a servant of the Ommissiah.

The Communique was filled with several useful pieces of technology and two incredible blessings of the Machine-God. The first section of the report was simply the usual platitudes and devotional litanies to the Machine God and the Ommissiah. Then the wonders began. The UNSC had developed a surprisingly robust personal shield system. Granted, the current system was rather limited in power. This shortcoming could easily be rectified by the union of Adeptus Mechanicus power supplies to the shields. Gho's associates on the nearby Forge Worlds and in the Iron Hands, Fire Lords and Silencers Chapters would be most interested in adapting this system.

The next series of data detailed the various weapons technologies of the UNSC ranging from their impressive coilguns, or MAC weapons as the Imperium's lost cousins referred to them, to the primitive autoguns used by their armies and numerous other weapons systems.

Shaw-Fujikawa Drives! Oh, this was truly a blessing of the Machine God! A method of Faster-than-light travel not dependent on the accursed Empyrean! And a purely technological one at that! Yes! calculated that the probability of the Navigator Houses resisting the implementation of this most blessed system at 73.913%. Violent resistance was at 1.138% with a 1.00924% increase each year as the transition from Warp Drives to Shaw-Fujikawa Drives neared

completion. This 'Slipspace' also presented numerous opportunities as a means of non-psychic galactic communications. Magos Michel had possibly provided the means to stabilize the Imperium of Man.

The Shaw-Fujikawa Drive was a blessing of immense importance. Next to the final section of the report, it was a candle trying to outshine a plasma reactor. Magos Michel had provided transcendence to the Adeptus Mechanicus. The UNSC had developed a ritual in which they could completely free themselves from their organic bodies. There would always be a place for the adoption of mechanical upgrades. It was a holy process and would never be abandoned. However, the process outlined in Brafor's report revealed a way to transfer their knowledge into a purely technological and mechanical form. A form free of physical restraints and capable of complete union with technology. It was the dream of his sect of the Cult Mechanicus. He was observing the path to perfection.

Yes! Gho, Arc-Magos of the Adeptus Mechanicus and disciple of the Machine God, sat on his command throne and wept.

Covenant Reverence Cruiser Transcendent Promulgation

Councilor N'gyven exited the chapel of his ship. The last of the grievously wounded Elites had succumbed to their injuries. Yeur, the ancient Oracle Master, snapped to attention.

"I have made more inquiries based on the information you have provided from your battle. The iconography of the foe you vanquished and the newest Heresy on High Charity share numerous glyphs. I am certain that you fought a separate sect of the same abominable cult."

There was no preamble and no polite platitudes. The Councilor nodded.

"Get me a secure line. I will speak with the Arbiter, Rtas 'Vadumee and all the members of the College of Aristocrats you can summon!"

The Oracle Master bowed and quickly left to carry out the Councilors orders.

Councilor Dra'sho N'gyven was alone with the weight of what he was about to call for. Could he carry it out? Could he bring down the Covenant? No. He wasn't destroying the Covenant. He was saving it. He would cut the cancer of heresy from the Covenant and leave a stronger body behind. The question remained, would his compatriots share his views or would they consider him an Oath Breaker.

His path was chosen and there would be no turning back. The doors to his chamber slid open and he took the first step onto a very dangerous path. His chambers seemed so small.

The collection of holographic arrays flickered to life. Rtas 'Vadumee stood at the center of the Holographic garden. One by one, other noble Elites popped into existence. The Arbiter was the final holograph to flash into being.

"Brothers" Dra'sho began with solemn determination. "We have reached a crossroad. The Ninth Age of Reclamation is ending. A time of

unprecedented Darkness is upon us. The threats facing our people are beyond anything we have ever faced."

One of the Councilors clicked his mandibles. "You surely can't be speaking of the humans."

N'gyven shook his head. "They are simply one of the trials facing our Covenant. Though, they are tenacious. You are all aware of the Prophet of Regret's squandering of many of our brothers. But they are not of whom I speak. I speak of the Jiralhanae, the Parasite and a new threat. A heresy graver than even the one the Arbiter and Commander Vadumee silenced so recently. It can only be described as Chaos."

A second Councilor inclined his head. "They will fall before our martial might. All our previous foes have."

N'gyven looked to the stars, for the guidance of his forebearers. "We are not ready for this foe. The Treaty the San 'Shyuum forced upon us has denied us the arms we require to defeat this foe."

The Arbiter crossed his arms. "What are you suggesting, Councilor? That we set aside the Writ of Union? That we split the Covenant?"

N'gyven stood straighter. "_I am no Oath Breaker, Arbiter!_ We will make no such move. I am merely suggesting that we ready ourselves for the Darkness that approaches. Is it a sin to gather torches in preparation for the coming of night?"

Oracle Master M'Saroo Yeur cleared his throat. "My lords, there is something you must see."

Rtas 'Vadumee rose to his full height. "And that is, Oracle Master?"

Yeur sighed. "A secure transmission from Ship Master Krasinee."

The Arbiter turned his gaze from N'gyven to M'Saroo. "The contents?"

M'Saroo keyed the proper runes. "His final moments. The _Pious Inquisitor_ has been lost. I received this transmission moments ago. I must warn this College that the foe he gave his life to resist is the highest order of blasphemy."

The message began.

_I send this to the members of the College of Aristocrats. The _Pious Inquisitor_ has been boarded by monstrosities. I bear the shame of this failure. Included in this communique is a report given by the Uggnoy Yutob._

The hologram replicated Oliak reciting a Hymnal of Preparation. The Ship Master activated his energy sword. A second voice was then heard. A voice of malice and ancient beyond reckoning.

Madness? I will show you madness...

The transmission continued and the stunned Aristocrats witnessed

Chaos. All of the ranking Elites felt their blood rise. This video was a call to war and the Elites would answer.

Installation 05

The Warthogs fishtailed around the bend in the path. A trio of Covenant Banshees screamed over a distant ridge. The Covenant was anything but subtle, but there was something unusual about their formation. It was too loose. There was none of the precision that generally typified the Sangheli.

"You noticed it too Chief? They'll be in range in 5."

John aimed the M41 Chain gun at the incoming Banshees and opened fire. The other two Warthogs added their ordinance to the sheet of fire. The closest Banshee was shredded and careened into an ancient Forerunner structure. A MAC slug gutted a second Banshee. The final alien flier corkscrewed out of the way and fled.

"Crap, it got away." Private Zhou grumbled as he scanned the road for lurking Covenant.

On the other Warthog, a second Marine took a deep breath. "Man, this is like a postcard. Dear Sarge, kicking ass in Outer Space. Wish you were here."

Johnson's voice clipped into the network. "I heard that, jackass."

Cortana chuckled. "Sergeant Johnson, Commander Keyes; what is your current situation?"

The crisp voice of Commander Keyes replaced Johnson's. "We've reached some sort of massive wall. This section of Halo seems empty. Let's hope it stays that way."

Johnson's voice once again joined the conversation. "On Halo that usually means the Flood is getting ready for an ambush. We need to keep moving. Next radio contact in 4 hours."

"Copy that. Good luck." Cortana said moments before the transmission was cut.

Private Zhou leaned out of the passenger compartment. "We've got a Covenant position. Look sharp!"

The Covenant position was a strong point. The Grunts and Elites manning the position had placed a sentry tower in the center of a natural rock formation. The main paths were covered by their portable energy shields and some improvised barriers. There were also more Shades than the UNSC troopers were comfortable with.

"Chief, what's the plan?" The Gunner of the MAC Warthog asked nervously. "I mean... the Ugliers know we're here."

The Master Chief leapt from the Warthog. "Stay here. I'll handle this."

A flurry of nods and nervous agreements met John's terse command. The Spartan walked over to the rock face lining the path the human

soldiers had taken. The various plants were seemingly healthier than on the first Halo. In all honesty, it didn't matter. The more verdant plant life was giving John better concealment and cover.

"You're going to jump again, aren't you?" Cortana asked, a mix of amusement and nervousness evident in her voice.

"I won't miss."

If Cortana had her projection, she would have nodded. "I don't doubt that. I'm more worried about the, you know, dozens of Plasma Cannons and Shades."

"You do trust me don't you Cortana?"

Cortana was silent. She hadn't expected that response from the Chief. Cortana did trust John, probably more than any being in existence. She trusted the Spartan more than her own creator. It was more than trust, though. It was a connection.

"I trust you. Just be careful."

"I'll keep my head down. There are two of us in this thing." Chief said as he tapped his helmet.

The Spartan reached the top of the cliff and sized up the Covenant position. He hoped they wouldn't see this coming. In an instant, he was running at full speed and with a bounding leap cleared the gap between the mesa and the Covenant anti-grav tower. The Jackals and Grunt manning the tower were, needless to say, surprised by the sudden arrival of the Demon. The ensuing firefight was quick and confused. Several of the Grunts had died before they even realized John was in their midst. A heartbeat later, the handful of Covenant fodder was dead. The Spartan ripped one of the Plasma Cannons from its mount. The remainder of the Covenant troopers were aware of John's attack at this point.

Master Chief grabbed one of the dead Jackals and activated all of the alien's plasma grenades. John-117 tossed the Jackal out of the tower using the beast's neck like a sling. There was a muffled explosion and a few shouts of panic from the Grunts below. John brought the looted Plasma Cannon to bear and poured a torrent of fire into the scattered troops below. In a matter of seconds, dozens of Covenant warriors lay dead. The Shade operators were shaken out of their stunned stupor and began to rake the Tower with a withering amount of fire.

John jumped down the gravity well and into the crevice at the tower's base. This provided great cover and denied the Shades line of sight to his position. He activated his com unit.

"Private Zhou, the Shades are distracted. I'll keep them focused on me. Hit them now!" Chief's voice was firm. He received a chorus of affirmatives. The replies were nervous, but had a steel behind them. John jinked as he ran from cover to cover drawing the attention and more importantly, the fire, of the Covenant. As John ran, a fragment of a memory flashed in his mind. If the fire hadn't been lethal, John-117 would have felt nostalgia for his youth training.

"The Warthogs are One Zero seconds out Chief." Cortana's voice piped

in. John, in his unusual state of retrospection, realized that he had come to view Cortana as indispensable. She was as vital to his continued existence as his MJOLNIR armor and his years of combat experience.

"Gotcha, Cortana."

Cortana found herself unable to respond. She had come to expect some level of informality between Chief and herself during quieter times. The Spartan had never been so... easygoing during combat before.

Then, one of the Shades was sheared from its mount. The hypersonic MAC round continued apace until it crashed into the rocky cliff face and shattered both the round and a large chunk of the cliff face. A second Shade was perforated by hundreds of rounds from the other Warthog's chain guns. John rose from behind his cover and expended the last of the Plasma Cannon's charge into a Jackal Phalanx. The aliens still hadn't learned to cover their legs when they advanced very well. Alien howls filled the air as the Kig-yar collapsed to the ground. Master Chief tossed a frag grenade into the writhing mass and moved on. A roar drew the SPARTAN-II's attention. One of the Elites had ignited his Plasma Sword and was advancing on John.

"Here, catch." John tossed the depleted Plasma Cannon at the Sangheli. The Elites truly deserved their title. Instead of falling for the obvious ploy and catching the empty weapon, he cut it in half. Unfortunately, John had counted on that and rushed the Sangheli. By the time the Elite realized what was happening, John's drop kick had connected. The force of being drop kicked by the Spartan knocked the Elite back. The alien's chest had been crushed and it lacked the strength to grab on to something solid before falling off the second cliff face surrounding the Covenant position. John took a deep breath after the last of the shooting died away.

"Master Chief! I think that was the last of them. The 'Hog's motion tracker isn't showing anything left." One of the marines shouted from the Warthogs.

"Clear." Chief said matter-of-factly.

All around them, the sound of beating wings and screeching filled the air. Then, the motion tracker turned solid red. The assembled UNSC soldiers looked up in unison. A cloud of leather winged monsters was flitting across the area. It was impossible to differentiate the individual creatures, but it was clear that their carapaces were red and their bodies were the color of bone.

"Well... shit." Cortana mumbled.

There was a quick violent whine and the MAC Warthog was seemingly hit by several dozen plasma grenades. Private Zhou, John-117 and the other surviving soldiers immediately opened fire. The attacking creatures were falling from the skies in droves. Chain gun and rocket fire were scything through them, but for every ten they killed, there seemed to be a hundred more.

The second Warthog stopped firing. The gunner started screaming at the weapon, literally begging the gun to start firing again. His M41

had run out of ammo. His wild, angry curses were replaced by howls of absolute agony as a swarm of razor-fanged beetles began tearing into his flesh. John fired a second rocket into the cloud of creatures. The resulting explosion took out numerous enemies. It was his last rocket and there were still nearly two score of the Gargoyles left.

Privates Zhou and Granger leapt clear of the Warthog as a second swarm of beetles was birthed from the disgusting biological guns of the brood. Zhou dove under a rocky pile as the maddened insects bounded away from the empty vehicle. Private Granger released a muffled scream as he was engulfed by the insects. The living ammunition expended their last bit of life force and fell away from the UNSC soldier's corpse. They had torn through his armor, his clothes and in several places had picked the meat from his bones. In fact, his chest had been eaten all the way down to his lungs. None among the surviving humans had seen such a grizzly sight.

Daniel Zhou grabbed a Covenant Plasma Cannon and started firing wildly into the remaining flock. John moved to follow the young man's example but was intercepted by a swooping Gargoyle. He deftly sidestepped the attack and brought the Missile Launcher crashing down on the flier. The force of the impact caused the Gargoyle's neck to snap, but also fouled the launcher.

John's motion tracker was once again gray.

The Gate of Chaos, formerly Installation 06

Tom stood impassively as Lucy removed her robes. He noted with pride that she had received her first obvious Daemonic gift. A pair of wings were pushing their way through her back. His old friend and comrade cried out as the wings erupted out of her skin. The Spartan-turned Chaos Astartes reached out with both his hand and his psychic gifts to steady Lucy.

On an intellectual level, he suddenly realized that if Lucy and himself had not been modified as they were, they would have likely been lovers. It was an amusing thought. However, the Spartan-III modifications they had both underwent and Tom's own ascension to an Astartes had rendered the chances of any sort of physical intimacy impossible. Perhaps Slaaneshi sorcery could address that problem, but neither Tzeentchian Acolytes were willing to risk their God's ire or the peculiar whims of the Dark Prince of Pleasure.

"Thank you Tom." She said simply. Her voice was pained after her body adjusted to her new Daemonic gifts and to the wounds she had sustained in her fight with the Khornate Word Bearer. She had been bloodied in the battle, but had emerged victorious. Her psychic might had overpowered what little protection the Lord of Skulls had deigned to grant Hakim.

_There is something we must discuss. _The communication was not truly words. Instead, they were emotions, impulses that Tom psychically transferred to Lucy.

Oh? Is this about Onyx or Lord Devadas? Lucy responded as she bound her many wounds.

_Both. Lord Devadas has departed for Earth. I tried to dissuade him,

but he claims he is being driven by a vision from the Changer of Ways himself. He has taken a number of Astartes with him and at least one Grand Cruiser._

Lucy turned around and shook her head grimly. _The Daemon Primarch Lorgar is going to be furious. This will force us to advance our timetable._

Far more than I would have liked. Fortunately, Lord Devadas has contacted a warband that would be willing to assist us. It is a combined force it seems, Astartes and unaugmented humans. We must make contact immediately.

Lucy nodded. _I can quickly heal if I enter into a regenerative trance during the Warp transit to Onyx. I will lead the standard humans. Your fellow Astartes will not listen to me as I am. Their arrogance infuriates me. Even Lord Devadas favors you above me. You, Tom, are the only one who hasn't tried to kill me yet._

Yet? Her candor had caught him off guard.

Our liege, the Changer of Ways, is a God of Hope. A god of Treachery. A God of knowledge and a God of Sorcery. Everyone has a price. I just hope the price you would accept to cast me aside would be suitably high.

_Your hope is well placed. _

Lucy winced as she chuckled. "Good, it would be a shame if I had to turn you into my pet Chaos Spawn."

"Yes, it would." The booming laughter of the Astartes joined the sorceress. It was simply the latest impossible sounds in a realm of impossibilities.

Bamburi, Republic of Kenya, East African Protectorate

General Sturnn clinched his fist inside his gauntlet in an attempt to control his trembling. He couldn't dare _hope, _could he? The Cadian had been exposed to the treachery and subversive nature of Chaos his entire life. Sturnn's Armor of Contempt had been honed every day since he could remember. One of his earliest memories was learning to make repairs to and fire his first lasgun with his father. All the while, the Old Man was telling him of his duty as a Cadian and the horrors of what he would face. Even has he scared the young boy, Sturnn's father had told him that his faith in the God-Emperor would preserve him. The General had faced Chaos in seemingly every form the Great Enemy could take in the Material universe, and a few blasphemous forms that shouldn't have existed. The Great Enemy always had a subtle sense of _wrongness_ to it, even the horrifically beguiling Slaaneshi daemons. This being was, for lack of a better term, perfect.

Behar stood up. "Is something the matter, General Sturnn?"

The voice was comforting and unlike the seductions of Chaos, did not hold the edge of arrogance or blood lust that was buried beneath the honeyed words of the Ruinous Powers.

"I... How, how can this be?"

Behar stood statuesque. "I am, what I have always been, Harald. A gatekeeper and a shepherd."

Sturnn struggled to reply. How had this man known his first name? Was he even a man? Possibly, he thought. Harald had seen Chaos Daemons take many forms in his lifetime of war, but he had never seen them take the form of an Imperial Saint or the Emperor. In fact, he had seen lesser daemons flash into steam after getting pinned by a statue of the Emperor. The Cadian turned to his advisors. Commissar Bostic appeared as if he was having the same internal debate as Harald. Johan didn't even acknowledge Sturnn's gaze and merely kept muttering the Litany of Command in an attempt to regain his composure. Erik would have been weeping, had he still had eyes. Instead, he was sniffing in an attempt to replicate the display of emotion lost to him since his Soul Binding.

The Kasrkin standing next to the image was simply praying in High Gothic over and over again. Again, Sturnn called upon his experience. Daemons and agents of Chaos couldn't bear to be in the presence of the holy. Harald Sturnn, General of the Imperial Guard, began to use his reason to discover his truth. As the thoughts rolled through his mind, he saw the man smile.

"What do you believe, Harald Sturnn?"

The Cadian General once again found himself struggling to reply. He felt like he was in the presence of his father again. It was like anything he could possibly say would fall short of the wisdom, experience and sheer presence of the greatness in front of him.

Greatness? Sturnn turned the word over in his head again and again. Had he just taken that step? Yes, he finally admitted.

"I... I believe that you could be the salvation of Mankind." Harald cursed in his mind. His voice sounded so small, so hollow next to the majesty of his questioner.

Behar nodded. "Do not build your faith on a foundation of false hope, General Sturnn. Tell me why you have placed such faith in me."

The voice was not a chiding command. It was the voice of a teacher. "Mombasa." Sturnn said softly as he motioned to the gathering crowd surrounding Behar and Sturnn's command squad. "You saved us."

Again, he motioned with his hand. "This Kasrkin has been praying in High Gothic which is as poison to the entities of the Warp, yet you have no ill effects. You are not of the Warp."

Behar crossed his arms. "Not entirely, I do have a strong connection to that shadowed realm. However, you are correct, I am not native to that realm of chaos."

Suddenly, he stopped and turned to Commissar Bostic. "Commissar, I need to use your vox unit."

Commissar Bostic snapped out of his internal conflict and made the Sign of the Aquilla. "My Lord?"

"Your vox unit, may I use it?"

Bostic stumbled as he took a step forward to hand over his vox. Sturnn was as shocked by Johan being so awestruck as his own inability to speak.

"Thank you Comissar." Behar activated the vox. "Lord Hood, this is Dr. Behar Tzavaras. Do you copy?"

Lord Hood looked up from his console. The voice didn't sound like Dr. Tzavaras, but there was something in his voice that demanded that Hood trust the doctor.

"Copy Doctor Tzavaras. What is going on? Mombasa got hit by the Slipspace wave. It's gone."

"I am afraid that we do not have the time for that conversation, Lord Hood. There is a fleet inbound. It is allied with Chaos. Inform the fleet to form a defensive cordon around the Anomaly."

Lord Hood scowled. "I know that you have ONI clearance, but how do you know about Chaos, Doctor?"

Behar took a deep breath. "A story, for another time. The pawns of the Dark Gods will be seeking to use sorcery. I can counter their powers."

In an eye blink, Dr. Tzavaras was standing in the control center of Cairo Station. The UNSC marines present immediately raised their weapons. Behar raised a hand. The marines looked at each other in confusion.

Lord Hood reached for his pistol. "How?"

Behar smiled. "I am a psyker, to borrow the Imperium's nomenclature."

"General Sturnn never mentioned a psyker having this ability."

The astral projection nodded. "My abilities are more.. pronounced than the most human psykers the Imperium has encountered."

Lord Hood moved from behind the control console. "Forgive me if I don't exactly trust the Warp. We can have Erik Lee counter the sorcery. I refuse to trust anything that can even be connected with them."

"A wise precaution, Admiral. Erik, for all his skill, could not counter the sheer number of enemy psychics. I can defeat their sorcery. Let me help you."

Terrence Hood circled the projection. The other UNSC personnel inside the heart of Cairo Station drew their weapons. The horrors of the last Warp Entity to enter this place was still fresh. The mind shattering portal of blood and bone was still visible in their mind's eye. Behar's somewhat hazy duplicate motioned with his right hand. In a moment of utter shock, Lord Hood watched as his pistol turned to water and splashed upon the ground.

"Again, Lord Hood, we do not have time. For the sake of Earth, we must cooperate. Astartes, corrupted by one of the four powers of the aether, are en route. I can counter their sorcery, but I _want_ your help."

The sound of metal striking metal snapped Lord Hood out of his stunned state. He looked down and realized his sidearm was a gun again. "We will have words, Behar."

The standing projection bowed his head. "Of course, Lord Hood. The enemy craft will be exiting the Warp half way between the Asteroid Belt and Mars. Their objective will be the Anomaly. I will provide targeting data for your MAC cannons and the Fleet."

Lt. Herd looked up from a console between glances at his soaked hand. "Sir, Ceres listening station is reporting a massive energy spike halfway between their location and Mars."

Terrence Hood cautiously cast a glance at his side arm, but decided against picking it back up. "I want you up here as soon as we deal with this new situation, _Doctor._"

"You have my word." Behar's projection vanished before the first word had left his 'mouth'. The words, however remained. There was a period of silence on the bridge before one of the command staff shouted out.

"How the Hell did he get past that Gellar Field?!"

Installation 05

Brother Captain Thomas came to a complete stop. He appraised the surrounding area and concluded that a group had recently passed through, or was still present. A twig bent here, evidence of a splash from one of the many puddles out of place there all stood out to his experienced eyes. The effects were slight and in this Galaxy, Thomas only knew of a handful of soldiers with that skill; SPARTANS and Sangheli preeminent among them. However, there was something that reminded him of his earliest days as an Astartes.

"Where there is uncertainty I bring light." There was silence. Captain Thomas took a breath. "***Where there is uncertainty I bring light!***"

A voice sang out from somewhere. "Where there is doubt, I shall sow faith."

Brother Ioannes trained his bolter to a rocky alcove. Warin continued the litany. "Where there is shame, I shall point atonement."

The voice responded and ten figures emerged from concealment from all around the Astartes Combat squad. The figures were clad in carapace armor painted quartered red and yellow. Several were armed with bolters, but there were a pair of sniper rifles, a heavy bolter and the sergeant carried a combi-melta. "Where there is rage, I shall show its course."

Captain Thomas smiled behind his helm. "My word in the soul shall be as my bolter in the field."

The Litany of Devotion was complete. Brother Rhys and Ioannes turned their bolters from the Astartes scouts and towards the flora. The scouts did as well.

"Hail, Son of Dorn. I am Scout Sergeant Horatio Bohn of the Howling Griffons Chapter."

"Hail, Son of Guilliman. I am Brother Captain Warin Thomas of the Imperial Fists, 4th Company. It is a blessing of our progenitors to see a representative of you Chapter. What is the condition of your proud brotherhood?"

"Separated by a cruel trick of the Warp. Half of our chapter has been transported to this new region of space. However, my lord, that is a story for another time and for Chief Librarian Casmiro to tell."

There was a slight slump in the Imperial Fists' captain's shoulders. "Mercaeno is dead?"

Horatio made the sign of the Aquilla. "Struck down by one of the Traitor dogs, the Soul Drinkers, milord."

Thomas nodded. "We shall mourn his passing after our mission is complete. We shall honor his memory through the destruction of the Emperor's enemies."

No more words were spoken and the Space Marines disappeared into the underbrush with only the wind as witness to their passing.

Forerunner Facility deep within Installation 05

Sergeant Avery Johnson trained his sniper rifle along the horizon. So far, the UNSC and Imperial force had only been engaged by the odd Sentinel. There had been no contact with the Flood or even the Covenant. It was incredibly worrying. Were they walking into an ambush? Was Avery leading them in the completely wrong direction? These were the hundred questions flowing in his mind.

"Sergeant Johnson! You should see this!" Commissar Halvorsen called from the flank of the force. Avery jogged over to the Imperial's position. A mixed squad of UNSC and Guardsmen were staring at the focus of all of Avery's nightmares.

A Flood Combat form.

In fact, it was several dozen Flood Combat forms. The humans had stumbled across the aftermath of a battle. The corridor was a sick parody of the usual Forerunner sterile precision. Instead, the walls were coated in places with Flood-like tissues and in others, strange organic towers were puncturing the walls. Everywhere, the stench of decay and death hung heavy in the air.

"What the hell could have done this to the Flood?" Avery said as he kneeled over a broken combat form.

Commissar Halvorsen grunted as he dragged a creature that looked like a madman's vision of an insect and reptile hybrid. "Tyranids. For the Flood to have killed so many of the Great Devourer's puppets, they

must be formidable indeed."

Commander Keyes walked over. "Commissar, Sergeant, from what you've told me, Commissar, and Johnson's own experiences with the Flood tell us is that both the Nids and the Flood grow stronger after absorbing the genetic material of their foe. If one side wins..."

Sergeant Johnson and Commissar Halvorsen shared a moment of absolute horror when the possibilities dawned on them.

"INCOMING!" A soldier screamed out. The group investigating officers rushed over to reinforce the troopers on the front line. The bark of battle rifles and the crack of lasguns filled the air and through it all the baleful hoarse cries of the Flood. The Flood was charging through a narrow door, denying them the weight of their superior numbers.

"I'm out!" A marine called from somewhere on the firing line. A Guardsmen stepped forward and aimed a flamer. Half a dozen other soldiers cried out that they had run out of ammunition.

"Stand back!" A gout of flame screamed out and engulfed the Flood Combat Forms, a gaggle of Infection forms and the corpses.

Commander Keyes reloaded her submachine gun. "Looks like we got lucky. If they hadn't been coming through that door..."

She was on the ground in an instant. Miranda took a gasp as Commissar Halvorsen stood over her, thrusting and parrying with his Power Sword. The UNSC commander scrambled to her feet. The Commissar was in a life or death struggle with a collection hideous Flood forms. Halvorsen growled as one of the monstrosity's pincers slashed at his torso. Blood splashed on Miranda's face.

"**For the Emperor!**"

The Commissar screamed as he slashed one of the monsters into pieces. The weapon's disruption field slicing through the Flood's body like bread. The surviving Flood form writhed in what Miranda thought at first to be agony. The Flood quickly reminded the humans that it was beyond such minor inconveniences as agony as it began to transform before their eyes. In a horrifying instant, it became a massive creature, comparable in height to a Space Marine.

The massive Flood roared at the Guardsmen and marines. Commissar Halvorsen rolled underneath a clumsy, but mighty swing and sliced off the monster's leg below the knee. A marine quickly ran up and dragged the Commissar out of the Flood's reach. The Flood Tank continued its assault and battered aside a Guardsmen who was aiming a Melta even as it fell.

The Flood Form hit the ground with a wet crunch. It began to transform again.

"Hey, honkey, up here!" For some unfathomable reason, the Flood looked up as its body bubbled and mutated. Sergeant Johnson pressed the Melta against the nightmarish creature's 'head'.

"Here, have a breathmint." There was a blinding flash as Johnson pulled the trigger. As the assembled soldiers blinked their vision

back, they realized the Flood was gone and the floor where the enemy had been mutating had been turned into molten slag.

A medic rushed over to Commissar Halvorsen and began tending to his wounds. The Imperial grimaced as a shot of biofoam was injected into the wound. Commander Keyes walked over to the Commissar and extended her hand.

"Thank you Commissar." Halvorsen took her hand and shook it.

"Thank me when you finish the job." He released the handshake and pointed into the distance. A number of Flood Combat Forms were charging from the mist.

A trio of Sangheli Combat forms leapt through the air attempting to close the distance.

They never made it. A torrent of lightning ravaged their bodies and the Flood burst into flames.

"What the hell was that?" Sergeant Stacker shouted as a blur appeared among the advancing Flood. Most were carved to pieces, but several were erased by a tear in reality. The combat last mere moments. Out of the shadows emerged a massive figure in blue armor. His footfalls thundered throughout the hallway.

"I greet you my brothers and sister of Terra. I am Chief Librarian Casmiro of the Howling Griffons Chapter of the Adeptus Astartes. It seems we share the same goal. Come, the Flood and the Hive Mind gather their forces. They will be at each other's throats for the time being. We must hurry."

Commander Keyes inclined her head. "Adeptus Astartes? You are a Space Marine?"

Casmiro bowed his head. "By the grace of the Emperor."

Commissar Halvorsen grunted as he rose to his feet. He snapped at one of the medics who tried to get him to rest some. The Space Marine smiled and made the Sign of the Aquilla. The servos in his massive Terminator armor hissed as the internal systems purged the Flood Mass from the joints. "Commissar, it is an honor. Tell me, the Imperium, does she endure?"

Halvorsen returned the smile. "She endures."

14. Chapter 14

The Immaterium

The Warp is unknowable to the minds of the creatures populating the Material plane. It is a dimension of impossibilities. Endless seas of emotion rolled and collided. The closest mortal terms could come to describing the accursed realm of the Dark Gods fell endlessly short. Concepts that are bedrocks of the Material Plane; time, space and form are things that exist on the whim of whatever entity is in 'control' of that 'segment' of the endless Immaterium.

The Greatest of the Warp Entities are what the mortals label the Dark

Gods: Khorne, Slaanesh, Tzeentch and Nurgle. These terrible sentiences were locked in an eternal game. Their 'armies' marched endlessly against each other fighting for absolute victory that would never come. In the event that one of the Great Warp Beings achieved ultimate victory, the Immaterium would calm, stagnate and die. Chaos would cease to exist. Therefore, even as the Daemons of the Gods marched against each other, they would fight against their kin in the army of one of the other Gods.

Chaos at its core is paradox.

So, the gathering of Khorne, Slaanesh and Tzeentch was an unusual and horrific gathering of power. Their 'proximity' generated Warp Storms throughout the Galaxy. In places, reality boiled and twisted. The Dark Gods did not notice. The affairs of the Materium rarely draw their dread attentions any more than humans give their attention to the grasses destroyed in their wars.

Tzeentch; the God of Sorcery, Machiavellian Plots and Mutation 'spoke first'. The Changer of Ways reached through the Warp and brought the latent psychic gifts of three thousand slaves in one of the Word Bearer's Hive Slums. This act served to 'greet' his brothers. He then caused these psykers to cure several thousand diseased slaves. His displeasure with Nurgle was made clear. On another world, he collapsed a dam and allowed the flooding of several miles.

Khorne raged as only the Lord of Battle, Murder and Bloodshed could. His provoked a warband of his Berserkers to attack a group of Nurglites that moments before they had been fighting alongside. Deep within the jungles of another world, he inspired an unnatural bloodlust in a tribe of primitive sapients. He guided their rage to attack the large hovel of their elder. Through the bloodshed, Khorne expressed his desire to strike at Nurgle's manse and eliminate the threat of Nurgle's Flood. That the world would soon be engulfed in a war of extermination launched from that village that would last three hundred years did not enter into the unfathomable mind of the Chaos God.

Slaanesh, beguiling as only an immortal can be spoke in honeyed tones. He whispered in the ears of his followers. The surprise of Nurgle's followers was tangible as the forces of Slaanesh suddenly joined in the assault spearheaded by their erstwhile Khornate allies. Thus did Slaanesh state his tacit approval of the alliance.

Tzeentch sought to further cement Slaanesh's position in the alliance by showing the youngest Chaos God, the potential of Nurgle's Flood. Tzeentch chose one of favored Champions and stripped his ability to even sense the most basic experiences. Slaanesh shrieked in horror at the realization. The Dark Prince of Excess quickly restored her champion's senses and countered the Architect of Fate's machinations. Slaanesh overloaded the senses of one of Tzeentch's magi and drove the old woman insane.

Khorne took up his dread sword and roared. His mighty strike caused a world's tectonic activity to go into overdrive and reduced the world to a dead husk. The two bickering gods were cowed by the Lord of Skulls' outburst and called a truce. Tzeentch and Slaanesh quietly swore to achieve a measure of petty revenge on the other after the threat of Nurgle's Flood was ended.

The three Chaos Gods marshaled their numberless legions and prepared for war.

Installation 05

Installation 05 was a scene of hellish total war between two all consuming races. The Flood and the Tyranids had even turned the surface of Halo into a weapon. Large swaths of the Forerunner installation were unrecognizable due to the level of Tyranno and Flood forming.

The surface of Halo, however, was buried under a sea of Tyranid Guants, Flood Combat forms and other horrors. A Tyranid Warrior's living whip cracked above a massive Gaunt brood. Even as Flood Controlled Wraith plasma mortars rained down all around them, they continued to advance. The Tyranid Warrior's Synaptic control allowed the Hive Mind to dominate the lesser creatures and remove any sense of fear, self-preservation or thoughts other than the complete destruction of the enemy.

The Flood Combat Forms were equally as focused. Even as several of their number were reduced to a soupy mess by a Tyranid Deathspitter, the Flood stood firm and continued to fire. The Flood was cutting down Gaunts by the hundreds, but still they came on. There seemed to be no give.

Until the ground gave way. As the ground exploded around the Flood position, broods of Raveners and Rippers in unseen numbers poured forth. The snake-like Tyranids' claws rended the armor of an infested Wraith and reduced it to scrap as the Rippers tore into the combat forms. The weight of numbers was too much, even for the stolen mechanized might of the Flood's position. In a horrible instant, the massive Tyranid broods had torn the Flood position apart. An eerie false silence descended as the Gravemind and the Hive Mind seemingly appraised the situation. The fighting, however, did not abate. Phalanxes of Flood Tank Forms battered their way through the ocean of Gaunts. The debased and corrupted forms of Humans and Sangheli serving as the backbone of the Gravemind's horde leapt amongst the endless swarm of Tyranids striking at Synapse Creatures and biovores. Though the Flood were bringing down numerous foes, they were markedly slower than most of the Gaunts and simply pulled down and butchered by sheer numbers.

The presence of the Covenant and Humans was noted by the dread sentiences engaged in mortal combat. At best, they were viewed as an annoyance to be eliminated. At worst, they were viewed as a resource to be utilized. The Sacred Rings of the Covenant had become anything but holy. The Milky Way was standing on the precipice of the abyss.

Sol System

Cairo Station was a scene of near panic. A fleet of several hundred Chaos Warships had emerged from the Warp and despite Tzavars' assurances they were all registering as real on every sensor in the system. The ships of the Imperium positioned themselves around the forward battle clusters.

Captain Paulos's withered form appeared on a communications screen. "Admiral Hood, my ships are in position. It has been an honor, but we

will not sell our lives to the Great Enemy so cheaply. _Ave Imperator! Ave Humanatus!_"

Lord Hood nodded. _Ave Humanatus?_ Terrence for once liked the sound of one of the Imperium's battle cries. "Ave Humanatus." He ran a hand over his Command Neural Interface. A sudden cool breeze behind him caused him to reach for his pistol, but as he turned it was the astral projection of Behar.

"I really wish you would stop that, Dr. Tzavaras."

Dr. Tzavaras smiled weakly. "Apologies." The projection walked over to a sensor. "Admiral, a large concentration of psychic energy is concentrated on this ship... here. I recommend that you focus your fire on this ship."

Admiral Hood shook his head. "I don't care about psychic energies! That looks like nothing more than an armed merchantman! There are ships out there that are twice the size of the _Palma_!"

The projection shone as a beacon. "Look again, as the fog lifts."

Lord Hood blinked the brightness away and the ringing in his mind. He looked down at the sensor data again. There were only a handful of ships. The largest of which was a single Grand Cruiser. "What the hell is this?"

"Illusions, Lord Admiral. Chaos has hundreds of pyskers enthralled on that ship allowing the sorcerers to create powerful illusions. They are not fooling your sensors, they are clouding your minds."

Terrence Hood, freed of the Chaos sorcery saw what the pawns of the Warp were attempting. It was actually a beautifully subtle plan. The illusionary fleet was headed straight for Earth with a few existing warships mixed in to cause actual damage. The main body of armed Merchantmen and heaviest warships were rushing towards the Anomaly. If the Merchantmen all carried a cargo of captive psykers, their objective was obviously to collapse the Anomaly before the might of the Imperium could be brought to the aid of the UNSC.

"Fire Control. Target the Merchantmen I am highlighting. Fire for effect!" The crew looked around confused. "I said, _Target the damn Merchantmen!_ They are carrying..."

Lord Hood took a deep breath. The words about to be spoken were unbelievable, even to himself. "Witches. They will use some form of psychic abilities to collapse the Anomaly."

Behar nodded. "A crude term, and distasteful, but accurate. I will lift the veil clouding the minds of the rest of the fleet."

Lord Hood nodded as the MAC Cannon roared its fury at the Chaos vessels. The Merchantman's weak void shields could not stand against the power of the UNSC's premier defensive weapon. The shell overwhelmed the pitiful void shields and tore the vessel in half. Debris, including people, servitors and even a handful of Chaos Space Marines, poured from the wound into the unforgiving and uncaring void. There was a moment of shared distress as the collection of

psykers cried out in terror as they died. This fear quickly washed away. Shouts of surprise and shock flooded the battlenet as the illusionary fleet shimmered and collapsed.

Lord Hood turned and smiled at Behar. "You were right!"

Behar scowled as he attempted to pierce the Aether. "It is not over. The Chosen Sorcerer is still out there. We must be ready."

Terrence Hood nodded curtly as he spoke with a visibly enraged Captain Paulos. The Imperial Captain was a terror in the heat of battle. The veins in his neck and face bulged and were visible beneath his pallid skin and the mechanical connections surged and sparked.

"Admiral Hood, the fleet's astropaths and navigators have confirmed that the fleet of the Great Enemy was bolstered by sorcerous illusions. How were they dispersed?"

Lord Hood barked out a terse command to a group of Marathon cruisers. "It is a complex situation. I promise that you will have a full explanation."

Captain Paulos sneered, a combination of his displeasure of not receiving a full explanation and his religion-fueled hate of Chaos. "A debt that will most assuredly will be repaid."

Terrence Hood's response was cut short as the last psyker transport was torn apart by nearly a dozen Shiva Nukes. A roaring cheer erupted over the com channels as the last surviving Chaos Warship was destroyed by a withering bombardment from the Spartan Ward.

The sudden psychic shriek quelled the budding celebration. Deimos was shredded and changed by the Warp Eruption. A corrupted mass of asteroid, ship and even organic material spilled forth. There was no denying the beast's intent.

Space Hulk Artis di Aestus

Devadas trembled with a rage he hadn't felt in nearly ten thousand years. There was a part of him that wanted to deny it, but the presence was undeniable. The Betrayer. The hated creature that had built an empire on the backs of heroes like Lord Magnus, Perturabo and Lorgar and then abandoned them. The Emperor sicced the feral Wolves of Fenris on the beautiful world of Prospero. Devadas hated the Corpse-God of the Imperium more for the barbarity of the Space Wolves than anything.

He would receive absolution today.

Artis di Aestus was incredibly powerful for a Space Hulk, but it was merely a copy of the monstrosity that destroyed the Scrying. Devadas remembered the rage and horror he felt as his fellow Scryers were pulling out of Ghosn, an Adeptus Terra data world. They had just secured a great deal of data that revealed that the Imperium was pulling away from the Segmentum Pacificus to better deal with the Forces of the True Gods and the Tyranid Onslaughts. As the mighty ships of the Devadas' Warband prepared to enter the blessed Aether, a massive Space Hulk emerged from the Warp like a knife from a sheath. It was certainly not of the Dark Gods, for it bore the lightning and

thunderbolt symbol of pre-Crusade Earth. The craft attacked with powerful Warp based weapons and overwhelmed the Scrying's ships with surprise and firepower. Devadas caught the faintest glimpse of the attackers as they boarded. A trio of female warriors were scything their way to the bridge and seemed to be cut from the same mold as the Grey Knights.

It had taken the summoning of a Lord of Change and a host of Furies after transitioning to the Warp to force them to retreat.

From that day, Devadas had been obsessed with recreating his mysterious foe's weapon. He could not replicate the destructive main weapon's function, but he had created a weapon of unbelievable power. It had taken horrid pacts with dozens of Obliterator Cults, the Dark Mechanicum and the binding of five score Greater Daemons, but he had created a weapon that possibly surpassed the Planet Killer in fury.

Yes, after thousands of years of set backs and betrayals, Devadas would have his absolution.

Covenant _Reverence _Cruiser _Transcendent Promulgation_

Councilor N'gyven stood silently as the last of the holographic figures of his associates flickered away. It was done. N'gyven had just killed the Covenant as it currently existed. Despite the magnitude of N'gyven's actions, he felt strangely at peace. The buildup to this moment had been overwhelming. Now, he had a strange sense of contentment. He could move forward.

Oracle Master Yeur walked several paces behind the Councilor.
"Councilor, the Ship Master requests a heading."

N'gyven turned. "Tell them we are heading to Rtho'dekal and then to Deserved Penance. I wish to investigate the cause of Sesa Refum's fall from grace."

The ancient Sangheli arced his head. "The Mausoleum world?"

"We will need the heirlooms of our forefathers. It will take all the might of Sanghelios to destroy the taint infesting this Galaxy."

The Oracle Master nodded. "But I will not be going with you will I? You have another task for me."

N'gyven nodded. "The College can only trust you with this. It is incredibly dangerous and cannot be told to anyone you do not trust utterly."

"Very well, Councilor."

The Councilor flexed his right hand. "We need you to make contact with the humans."

Yeur coughed loudly. "The College supports this?!"

The younger Elite nodded. "Yes, it was actually R'tas Vadumee and the Arbiter's idea. The College voted. Many were against it including myself, but the will of the College was made clear. Our War with the humans is not over, but we have greater concerns now. They are

battered, down to a handful of worlds. We have either set their holdings to the torch, or Brute and Kig'Yar privateers have occupied them."

"The humans will likely kill me. However, if it is the will of the College, I will go."

"It is the will of Sanghelios. The humans are a minor threat in the larger picture, but they are tenacious and if the war continues as it rages now, they will fight to the last. We can not afford such a drain on resources that would be better used to cut the cancerous heresy from our Covenant."

Yeur nodded grimly. "It will be so."

The old warrior saluted and left. Councilor N'gyven raged in his mind. Yeur had been his mentor for decades and the councilor had just ordered him to die. N'gyven prayed to the Forerunners that if the Oracle Master were to die, that it would be in honorable combat. There was a part of N'gyven that hoped that the humans would see reason. The Elite found himself admitting that the humans had several positive traits; their tenacity foremost among their traits. Surely, they could see the threat posed by the hellspawn!

His concerns quieted temporarily, N'gyven marched resolutely to the command chamber.

Forerunner facility, Installation 05

Sergeant Johnson scanned the walls for further attacks by the Flood. The presence of the giant walking tank that could throw lightning and sense the approach of the Flood helped.

Avery still didn't fully trust the Space Marine. He had found out from some of the Guardsmen that psykers draw their power from the Warp. Daemons came from the Warp. In Johnson's mind, that connection would always cause him to be incredibly cautious around Psykers.

Casimiro halted in his tracks and shouted. "Incoming, take cover!" As soon as the words left his lips, a plasma grenade detonated mere feet from the Terminator. UNSC marines stood slack jawed at the complete lack of damage to the massive warrior.

Commander Keyes ducked behind a fleshy tower. "Take cover!"

The human soldiers ducked behind cover just as a large group of grunts charged around the corner. The poorly aimed plasma pistol fire impacted against the horribly contaminated walls. The humans returned fire in a devastating volley. Las shots and bullets tore chunks from the unfortunates they struck. However, compared to the terrifying damage inflicted by the Melta, flamer and Casimiro's storm bolter the mundane weapons were a mercy. It was a short bloody fight.

Johnson walked up to the Space Marine. "Strange. The chimpies didn't have an Elite with them. That means they were probably bait."

Casimiro nodded. "They were. There seems to be a large group in cover just beyond the corner. Unusual, there are very few Grunts and no

Sangheli in the ambush position."

Commander Keyes reloaded her gun. "Then what is at the ambush position?"

Casimiro shook his massive head. "Jackals mostly. There is a type of Covenant Xenos I have not encountered at the position."

Johnson took a deep breath. "They're like giant apes aren't they."

The Astartes Librarian nodded. "Aye. I have never encountered their ilk in all my time in this galaxy."

Avery stared distantly at the ceiling. "I have. Back when the war started. Back on Harvest."

The mention of Harvest caused the blood to rise in all the humans present.

Commissar Halvorsen took a deep breath. "We must take that position! If the Covenant delays us here, they will continue to advance on the Index."

A marine spoke up. "They are pretty dug in. I mean, this will be tough, even with the armored guy."

Casimiro smiled. "There is no alien bastion humanity cannot overcome. Besides, I'll act as bait. It'll be a lot easier for the rest of you if the Covenant is directing all their fire at me."

The giant's voice was full of humor, which surprised everyone present.

Private Connor raised his hand. "I am all for not getting shot at. Especially if I can kill some squiddies while not being shot at."

Commissar Halvorsen glared at Connor and instinctively reached for his laspistol before realizing Connor was continuing the humor.

Casimiro became harsh. "We need to attack now. I will draw the enemies fire and eliminate as many as possible. You must follow my assault immediately."

The Terminator surged around the corner, his abilities giving him mere seconds of foresight. It was enough to dodge the hail of needle and plasma fire from the position. Bolt shells roared their hatred for the enemies of mankind and in seconds, numerous aliens were dead. As the Covenant focused on the rampaging Marine, the other soldiers of Terra charged the position.

The Chief Librarian had no need of assistance and in his foresight he knew this. However, in his centuries of service to the Emperor, he had learned the value of diplomacy. Casimiro had no desire to alienate the soldiers of the UNSC or the Imperial Guard. He had instead directed them to advance at the proper moment to intercept a flanking maneuver by the Covenant. This would allow them to contribute to the fight and earn honor. The bulk of the attack

consisted of Grunts. That fact alone saved many of the unaugmented soldiers. The fire of the Brutes was more accurate and one of the marines fell to a Brute Plasma round. The Guardsmen with the flamer turned his fiery rage on the flanking xenos. Grunts screamed in agony as they were engulfed. Las and bullet fire downed the rest of the cannon fodder. Sergeant Johnson's burst fire from his battle rifle dropped the Jiralhanae leading the attack.

The remaining Brute became enraged at the loss of its pack-mates and leapt clear over the barricade. In a blind rage, it lashed out at Casimiro. The fight was as bloody as it was short. The Terminator simply beheaded the xenos with a single swipe of his Force Ax. The head rolled down the hall.

"Let's not tempt Murphy, boys and girls. We need to secure the Index." Sergeant Johnson took point and kept moving. Casimiro felt the waves of distrust flowing from some of the UNSC soldiers, but did not speak of it.

Surface of Installation 05

Master Chief moved silently from cover to cover. As he approached the Forerunner bridge, a few Ghosts and a Wraith arrived escorting a number of Shadows. Something had really mauled the Ghosts and Shadows. As John inched forward, the voices of the Sangheli in charge and a Brute were clear and decipherable. The presence of the Jiralhanae was unusual. John, and UNSC intelligence, had been lead to believe that Brutes were second-line soldiers. The fact that they were on the main lines was testament to just how desperate the situation on Delta Halo was becoming. The Tyranids and the Flood were bloodying the Covenant just as much as humanity.

"Captain Eridikus, I demand an explanation for your units foolish and unauthorized attack! I had ordered your unit to remain in position. Your charge opened a highly exploitable hole in our lines. Your impudence cost the lives of over one hundred Uggnoy, several dozen Kig-Yar, several of your own kind and eight brave Sangheli. I _demand_ an explanation."

The Jiralhanae roared a blast of wordless rage. "My pack launched a rescue mission! We received a plea for aid from members of our tribe and we rescued them from being absorbed into the Parasite! Our actions saved dozens of Jiralhanae and we managed to destroy a number of their wretched cocoons!"

The Sangheli stepped forward. "At the cost of hundreds of Covenant lives and several vital vehicles! The Covenant is fighting to protect the sanctity of this Sacred Ring from the tides of Parasites and Locusts devouring it! We have even come under attack from humans! If we are not united and _follow the chain of command_, this Ring will fall into darkness!"

Eridikus humphed. "Follow the chain of command? You mean be blindly subservient to your race! The armies of the Covenant cannot be defeated! Yet, you have us setting up 'defensive perimeters' and carrying out 'Surgical Strikes'! Why do we not attack the enemies of the Prophets!?"

The Elite commander snarled. "Have you seen the data on the areas of Halo outside our control? Most of the surface has either been

stripped completely of all biological matter or has been corrupted by the Flood! The last major offensive we launched was utterly annihilated. Hundreds of warriors were taken by the Parasite! The other prong of the strike was _consumed!_"

"You Sangheli always over-think your strategies. I will admit, the attack plan _might_ have succeeded against the pagan humans, but these foes are not the humans. There is no need for trickery! Brute, unthinking violence is the most effective way to smash these enemies."

John-117 had continued to move forward as the two Covenant soldiers continued to bicker. He eventually reached the Wraith. The Elite driver was tending to the wounds of another soldier and had left the Wraith unguarded. The SPARTAN ran nearly at full speed and leapt onto the alien tank. The aliens reacted to the sound of the armored human entering the tank and gathered their weapons. Chief first fired a Plasma Mortar shot into one of the Shadows. The APC exploded sending shrapnel and flaming debris in all directions. He then activated the defensive weapons and opened fire on the confused Grunts and enraged overseers. The surprise attack eliminated several dozen Covenant and crippled their position. Chief opened fire on the advancing Ghosts as Cortana relayed their position to the other human soldiers. As Chief fell back in good order, a Pelican strafed a collection of Covenant Grunts. An Imperial walker design Chief hadn't seen before detached from the Pelican. It landed a few dozen meters from a the Shadows.

The walker fired a volley of shots from its laser weapon into one of the Shadow buses. A plume of fire bloomed from the Ghost being carried by the carrier and several Unggoy were scythed like wheat. The arrival of UNSC marines, Guardsmen and a Scorpion tank turned the fight into a total rout.

Then a barrage of Flesh began.

"Tyranid Spores!" The voice was tinged with fear. The spores bloomed like gory flowers and dozens of scuttling creatures clawed from their organic transports. The Guardsmen immediately began firing as they fell back in good order towards the Sentinel and the Scorpion. The Marines provided cover fire. It was a text book operation.

But the Tyranids kept coming. Gaunts used the mounds of their own dead for cover. The Sentinel's multilaser and the Wraith's plasma ordnance were thinning the swarm. Only a few Gaunts reached the humans to reap a bloody tally, but those were quickly cut down by the vengeful humans.

The sound of the screaming Sentinel pilot and the sound of straining metal turned the soldiers' attention from the killing grounds. The Tyranid creature tearing into the Sentinel was seemingly covered in a permanent haze. A series of fleshy spears shot from the chest of the assassin and ripped the screaming pilot from the cockpit.

Sergeant Kolak tore the Sniper Rifle out of the hands of a marine and put a bullet through the pilot's brain. The 14.5x114mm sabot round did not do considerable visible damage, but accomplished its goal. The knowledge of the Sentinel pilot was denied to the Hive. The round also managed to do some severe damage to the Lictor.

"What the hell was that for?!" A UNSC marine yelled.

Rogal turned and shook his head. "It was a mercy. That thing was going to eat the pilot's brain and gain all his knowledge."

Sergeant Ross Keller shouldered his weapon. "That things not dead! Stay Focused!"

As if the universe wished to accent his point, the Scorpion was tossed aside like a children's toy. The largest creature any of the UNSC troops had ever seen was tearing into the armored vehicle like a maddened living can opener.

"_Carnifex!_" A Guardsmen screamed the monster roared in triumph. John-117 wasted no time and turbo-boosted closer to the Carnifex. The thorn-backed monstrosity barely had time to register the approach of the Wraith before a Plasma Mortar shot sent it reeling. In a rage, the giant Tyranid barreled through the wreckage towards Master Chief. The las and bullet fire from the other humans failing to even penetrate the bonded exoskeleton of the Tyranid.

The Wraith's plasma cannons spat defiance at the charging beast. The creature ignored most of the wounds, but a pair of lucky blasts damaged the monstrosity's movement leg.

"Chief, bail! Get out now!" Cortana yelled as she realized the Tyranid was still charging despite the numerous wounds it had suffered. The charge hit home right as the Spartan leapt from the Covenant Wraith. It exploded violently as the Carnifex's Scything Talons pierced the Core.

"Cortana to any UNSC aircraft. Support needed at my location!"

"This is Alley-Sigma. Hornet Flight inbound to your location. Designate Target."

Cortana described the rampaging Carnifex in detail.

"Damn, one of those?"

Cortana paused as Chief rolled out of the way of the Carnifex and grabbed a Covenant Plasma pistol. The giant Tyranid was stunned by the explosion of the Covenant Grav tank. "Have you encountered one of these things?"

"Once, on a flyby of the Flood zones."

The lead AV-14 swooped over the ridge with a pair of Hornets on his flanks. The VTOL attack craft swooped in low and opened fire with their Gatling cannons. The rounds tore into the Carnifex. Royal purple ichor oozed from the gaping wounds. Still the Tyranid continued its rampage. The beast suddenly came to a stop a few meters from Master Chief and a terrible whine filled the air. John began to overcharge the Plasma Pistol. A bolt of energy appeared in the throat of the Monstrous Creature. The massive front scything talons slammed into the ground. John released the plasma bolt from it's magnetic hold.

The overcharge struck the bioplasma and through a strange reaction, exploded violently. The Tyranid collapsed in a bloody heap. It's head

was clearly _gone._

The Marines and Guardsmen whooped loudly, thankful to have survived an encounter with a beast like that.

Cortana, her voice completely deadpan, simply said. "Holy Shit."

The Daemon World of Rhodes

Her eyes had been closed for longer than she could remember. Every muscle in her body burned and screamed for rest. She could not stop. If she stopped, the defilers of her home and friends and families would likely consume her as they had everyone else.

As she danced, she felt two of the smaller feminine beasts fall in beside her and time slowed and warped. Hours, maybe days, passed as Glaia danced to appease her tormentors. The jeers of some of the demons never stopped. Glaia wept at the horrors she refused to look upon. She nearly tripped as a toothless maw drank the tears as they fell to the ground.

"I grow bored!" A voice that was both repulsive and alluring rang out.

"Plria'bviu'dinus, you cannot have already gorged yourself on the subtle delicacies of suffering and pain this mortal gives off?"

The first voice gave a horrible braying sound. "There are countless other worlds! Why must we watch this single mortal for so long?"

Why indeed? The voice was so utterly perfect that Glaia nearly fell to the ground in an ecstatic fit. However, she managed to transition her stumble into a new dance, a simplistic exercise from her first days as a dancer.

The hordes of daemons were immediately cowed. _I could watch this one forever. Hmm... In fact I will. Open your eyes, dancer._

A part of Glaia's mind pleaded and begged for her to resist, to keep her eyes closed, but the voice was so calming, so _wonderful_ she had to obey. Glaia wailed at the sight of her homeworld and the demons who had been watching her performance for the untold age. There were thousands of entities all around her. Many were lithe feminine creatures, but demonic in appearance. They had a crablike claw in the place of one of their arms. Their hair was a nest of vipers or for some a mass of tentacles. The largest of the creatures varied in form from giant equine beasts to horrifically beautiful feminine or hermaphroditic creatures. All had six limbs and occasionally shifted into the illusion of Glaia's loved ones or objects of desire.

_Your offering had pleased me. Your suffering has intrigued me. I claim you Glaia and will gift you to forever dance. You are my herald. _

Glaia shivered as the painfully pleasurable sensation of a clawed hand caressing her mind filled her. _I will give you a gifts, tools to spread the joy you have given me to other worlds. _

A Daemonette, one of the blessed handmaidens of the Dark Prince of

Excess approached and carried a pair of ornate swords and a strange brooch.. The swords were carried on a silver platter of unmatched quality. Glaia, compelled to dance by the will of the otherworldly voice took the swords and the brooch.

The ages of torment and darkness welled up in Glaia and she attacked the gift bearer. She sliced the creature desiring to bring some measure of the suffering she herself had endured upon this monster. Instead of crying out in pain, the daemon cried out as if she was experiencing sexual climax. The rational part of Glaia's brain, the part buried underneath the joy of her senses to simply be experiencing light and color and feeling something other than the rough rocky ground and her bleeding feet, was calling on Glaia to realize the horrors of what she was experiencing.

She didn't care.

_Now, slave, go forth. _Glaia, driven by the seductive will of the voice and the fear of rousing the wells of anger her mysterious patron undoubtedly possessed, moved gracefully amongst the Daemon World of Rhodes towards a waiting shuttle.

Sol System

_Artis di Aestus _burned as gas vented from numerous wounds inflicted by the UNSC and Imperial fleet. It wasn't enough. The massive bulk of the Chaos Space Hulk and it's highly decentralized nature prevented the united humanity from striking the decisive killing blow it so desperately needed. Laser Batteries and even some primitive chemical fueled rockets were fired in response from the enormous Chaos Craft. UNSC and Imperial fighter craft managed to intercept the physical ordinance.

The behemoth's void shields were layered and had numerous redundant generators. An additional layer of protection was provided by a thousand and one dark blessings.

The UNSC had learned to keep to their maximum range. Several ships that ventured closer to the Space Hulk to inflict greater damage where quickly overrun by numerous Warp Creatures. After five ships had been devoured by the Legions of Chaos, closing to point blank range was forbidden by Lord Hood.

"_Attention all UNSC and Imperial Naval Personnel. The Enemy has reached the L2 Defensive Line. Repeat, the Enemy has reached the L2 Defensive Line."_

Aboard the UNSC frigate _Montevideo, _Lord Hood's announcement was another blow against their morale. They had survived the Covenant attack and the first Chaos Assault. The arrival of the Space Hulk and the running battle from Mars to L2 had been a drain on morale, crew energy and lives.

"Captain, there is something wrong in the Archer Pods."

Captain Gopal Tilak shook his head. "When it's something as important as our Archer Pods, I need you to be a lot more specific than 'something wrong', Mr. Hollis!"

Hollis gulped. "It... It sounds like a very angry cat sir."

Captain Tilak snorted. "It's an illusion. Just like the bulk of the first Chaos attack. Recycle the Pods and get them back online."

"Aye sir. Recycle commencing..."

Another member of the bridge crew shouted out. "Something is forcing its way through the loading door for Archer Pod 3!"

Captain Tilak rose from his command position. "Seal bulkheads and open Archer Pod 3 to vacuum. Get a security detail in position in case whatever it is gets through."

"Aye sir." The chief of ship security shouted as he ran began to contact all security teams.

Gopal tapped out a command and opened a channel to the fleet. "This is Captain Tilak of the Montevideo, FFG-412. A hostile Warp Entity has compromised the Montevideo. We are maneuvering away from the fleet in case our containment efforts fail."

The voice of Admiral Harper was grave. "Understood Montevideo. Route all updates on containment efforts to Imperial Station."

A voice called out from the bridge of Admiral Harper's Marathon-class. "Admiral! Energy spike in the Anomaly!"

The Luna Anomaly, the UNSC's link to the distant and numberless forces of the Imperium of Man, flared and grew larger.

A mighty cheer erupted over the battlenet. The Imperium had truly arrived! The first vessels through the bleeding breach in reality were the mighty battle barges Litany of Fury of the Blood Ravens, Leonidas of the Celestial Lions, Penitent Warden, of the Lamenters and the Strike cruisers of the Imperial Fists, Ultramarines, Knight Brothers of Kadesh and the other Space Marine Chapters who had answered the call to defend the UNSC.

The Space Marines' vessels surged forward to support the raging battle. Behind them, scores of Imperial Navy vessels emerged from the swirling miasma of the Warp. Nimble escorts and light cruisers pushed their engines to flank speed to reach the battle.

It was a sight of glory. Despite the fact that several dozen vessels bore the scars of recent combat, the UNSC only saw the beauty of hope.

The Montevideo's communication suite crackled as one of the Imperium's ships attempted to make contact. "Montevideo, do you copy? This is Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens."

Gopal sat up in his command chair. The voice was deeper than any human voice he had ever heard, but it possessed an unmistakable air of nobility. "This is Captain Gopal Tilak of the Montevideo. We copy."

"Captain Tilak, is there a way you can increase your ships sensor profile. It is difficult for the Litany of Fury's teleporters to get a concrete lock on your vessel."

Gopal felt his jaw slacken. "Teleport?"

Captain Angelos gave an unseen nod. "Affirmative Captain."

Gopal sat silent for a moment. "Mr. Hollis, divert power from the MAC coils to the sensors. I want as much energy in an active ping as you can without frying ourselves."

Mr. Hollis raised an eyebrow. "Sir?"

The horrified screams reverberating from the inter-ship comms ended all debate. "My God in heaven! Fall back!"

Other shouts of utter terror and even weeping chilled the crew to the bone.

"On it sir!"

The other members of the bridge crew shouted out terse and fearful updates on the progression of the Warp Entity. The sensor ping was undetectable by humans and other than the announcement from Lt. Hollis, went completely unnoticed.

Moments later, the smell of ozone filled the bridge and a milky blue light appeared at the back of the bridge. The haze coalesced into a gigantic figure. Gopal realized that the man was as tall as a SPARTAN and much broader. He was encased in ornate power armor. There were many sections of the armor that seemed to be encased in gold. However, that was highly unlikely as gold was a soft, malleable metal that was ill suited for armor. The soldier, and he clearly was a soldier, wielded a massive hammer that glowed from an unknown power source. A massive pistol rested in the man's gigantic hand. Captain Tilak then looked the man in the eyes. The warrior looked as though the wait of ages was upon him.

Gopal took a deep breath. There was clear Imperial iconography on the man's armor. That was a comfort as from all evidence, the Warp Entities had some sort of aversion to Imperial iconography. In the briefing given by Fleet Admiral Harper and Commander Kale of the Imperial Fleet, it was revealed that the 'demons' could not accurately, or willfully, create icons of the Holy. ONI had predicted that it was due to the low-level gestalt psychic potential of the human race.

"Welcome aboard the Montevideo, Imperial."

The Imperial bowed slightly. "Thank you Captain Gopal. I am Captain Gabriel Angelos of the 3rd Company of the Blood Ravens. What is the status of your containment efforts of the Daemon?"

Gopal motioned for the Blood Raven to follow him to a datascreen. "Currently, our security forces are being pushed back. We are taking severe losses. We aren't getting much solid information as Warp Entities are, as you undoubtedly know, anathema to human thought."

"Daemons are more than anathema to our way of thinking, Captain. They are anathema to our very existence. Inform your security detail to fall back. I will cleanse this taint myself."

Artis di Aestus

Devadas, Sorcerer of Tzeentch and the final survivor of the Scrying, roared his displeasure. He did not usually vent his anger like a maddened follower of the Soul Eater, but this situation was near unbearable. The Betrayer had dispersed his sorcery far quicker than he could have ever imagined. Worse, he had underestimated the power of the UNSC's MAC guns. Alone, they could not hope to even slow the _Artis di Aestus_, but they could combine their fire to drop swaths of the Hulk's void shields to the wrath of the Imperial Navy's Lance and weapon batteries and the Nuclear missiles of the UNSC ships.

And now, the Juggernaut of the Imperial Navy's vast numbers had arrived.

Expanding his psychic might to the very limits, he interfaced with the Greater Daemons bound to the primary weapon. He was too far from Terra to crack the planet like an egg, but he was close enough to burn away the atmosphere and boil the oceans.

He realized that he was doomed and embraced his role in the grand designs of Tzeentch. Devedas bargained his soul for more power to the main cannon and one last spiteful curse to the defenders.

Death to the False Emperor!

Bamburi, Kenya

Behar Tzavaras looked up in shock as he sensed the immense build up in power in the Space Hulk. He reached inward and drew upon his reservoir of power. It took Behar a heartbeat to realize that it was far easier to draw upon his psychic curse. The sharp increase in his power was undoubtedly thanks to the millions of Imperials directing 'worship' towards him. As he further directed his attention into the Aether, he followed the strains of emotion and energy. The Chaos Psyker was preparing an a Daemon Cannon to fire. The sorcerer was pouring every ounce of his accursed being into the attack.

The Daemons of Chaos were swarming toward the build up in energy, waiting eagerly for the opportunity to tear through the rift in numbers unseen since the birth of their masters. Behar was forced to divert more and more energy to waging a struggle that the average human mind thankfully could not comprehend. It was a terrible struggle in which the hopes and dreams of billions were used as weapons to counter the utter anguish of the dead.

The weapon fired.

Lagrange Point 2

The void shrieked in agony. Warp energy spread like a tumor from the central orifice. Several of the UNSC and Imperial ships could not clear the path of the writhing energy and were consumed. Death would have been a simple mercy. It was fortunate for the defenders of humanity only a handful of ships, mostly light cruisers and frigates were lost.

Reality roared in even greater pain as a second wound into the Warp tore open. This new maw seemed to position itself in front of the _Artis di Aestus_'s main weapon. The beam of pure malice and rage was

gulped greedily into this new rift. It took almost a minute for the energy of the Daemon cannon to be redirected back into the Immaterium. In the wake of the attack, space glowed and shifted.

Aboard the Montevideo, the crew sat in stunned silence as they watched the horrific exchange of energy. At times, the minds of the crew buckled and threatened to shatter. Gopal desperately tried to speak, but he found himself totally transfixed by the dance of power.

Deep within the bowels of the Montevideo, Gabriel Angelos was involved in his own dance of power with a surprisingly powerful Daemonic entity. The entity possessed the head of a tiger on a bipedal frame. The frame was emaciated and possessed numerous boils and lesions. It was quiet unlike anything Gabriel had encountered in the Chapter's librarium. Even as he rolled out of the way of a rusted machete swipe, he was observing and cataloging every detail of the enemy. Knowledge ****is**** power and using it, the Blood Ravens were destined to secure the future of the Imperium and the human race as a whole. The Nurgle Daemon screeched as it shambled towards the Angelos. The hall reverberated with the crack of the Captain's bolt pistol. The bolt struck home and sent the daemon reeling. Captain Angelos was quick to exploit the opening the infliction of the wound provided. He yelled the mighty battle cry of his chapter as he swung God-Splitter in a violent arc. The Nurgle creature was seeping contaminants and pus from the bolter wound in his leg and could not react fast enough. The Daemon-hammer smashed into the demon's physical form with the might of humanity's rage and desire to not just survive but to dominate the galaxy. In a howl and explosion of gore, the Demon vanished.

The Blood Raven offered his thanks to the Unknown Primarch and to the Emperor for guiding his strikes against the Great Enemy. He then activated his comlink

"Captain Tilak. Do you copy?"

The surprised, _huh?_ caught Gabriel slightly off guard. "I copy, Angelos. Did you kill it?"

Gabriel continued to walk down the hall towards the sealed bulkhead. "I have successfully banished the scion of the Great Enemy. How fares the battle?"

"The enemy fired some massive Immaterium-based weapon against Earth." Gabriel's jaw clinched and for a moment he knew rage, but his vast experience over his centuries of service held that fount of power in check so it could be unleashed at the proper time. Gopal did not see this reaction and merely continued.

"It didn't hit. A tear in reality just appeared. The enemy weapon didn't hit Earth! I... I don't know how it happened."

The Space Marine knew a moment of relief and joy. There was only one being with that level of Psychic power who would _want_ to defend Earth. Could it be? Could the Emperor be walking amongst his people? Could he _hope?_

Gabriel nodded. "I will be returning to the bridge shortly."

L2 Defensive Line

The unsuccessful firing of the _Artis di Aestus_ had overloaded most of the void shields on the massive Space Hulk. As soon as the human fleet detected the drop in the protective shields of the massive vessel, they swarmed over it like a nest of enraged hornets. Lance, MAC, laser and all of humanity's space weapons were unleashed upon the hated beast. The wrathful weapons of the fleet tore huge gouts into the superstructure. Several pieces shattered and drifted aimlessly after being freed. A single _Dauntless_ light cruiser reported that one of the pieces seemed to maneuver on its own power and even enter the warp. Command dutifully filed it away to be investigated later. The Chaos Hulk was being battered by hundreds of ships and in moments, would fall to the triumphant fleets of man.

Devadas knew that his gambit had failed. Something in this galaxy had been hiding the presence of the hated False-Emperor from his sight. Devadas called upon his patron, offering his soul in exchange for his failure and for one last chance to unleash his spite upon that most hated being. The inscrutable Changer of Ways accepted, knowing that Devadas's petty request would actually advance the Weaver of Fate's grand scheme.

The _Artis di Aestus_ finally succumbed to the relentless bombardment of the Iron Snakes Strike Cruiser _Iku-Turso_ and the _Avenger_ Grand Cruiser _Sword of Macharia_ that included both weapons batteries and a pair of cyclonic torpedoes.

The Space Hulk exploded spectacularly. Throughout the Sol system, sailors and soldiers celebrated the victory. Terra had weathered two brutal battles in scant days from two hated enemies. The utter defeat both enemies had suffered was a mammoth boost to morale.

On Cairo Station, Lord Hood was returning a hearty congratulatory handshake from one of his officers. He turned to the view screen and grinned as he saw the debris field that had once been a monstrous threat to all of humanity.

"That's the fate of all the monsters of Chaos!" It was an outburst the normally composed Admiral rarely let happen, but given the mighty accomplishment he could forgive himself. The Imperial Admiral, a grim ethnic African looking man, named Obvi Kaal had just informed him that the entirety of the 'First Fleet of the UNSC Relief Crusade' had arrived and achieved satisfactory orbit. Thousands of landers carrying millions of Imperial Guardsmen were streaming to the surface of Earth to reinforce the planet. It was the first time in thirty years that Lord Hood truly and completely believed that the Covenant could actually be defeated. Recently, even in his most optimistic moments had only believed that the UNSC could reach a settlement with the Covenant. The emotion, the pride was overwhelming.

Then, a voice entered his head. _No, 'Lord' Hood, you are the monster._ The voice was strained, but there was no hiding the desperate malice or the arrogance even as it faded into oblivion.

Lt. Herd cried out in horror. "Reactor spike detected in the debris field of the Chaos fleet!"

Magos Micel feverishly worked the sensor controls of the bridge. "Reactor profile identified! It is a Class-Four Ore Hauler. The craft is heading for the Anomaly!"

Lord Hood called out, the horror clear in his voice. "Take it out! All craft, weapons free!"

The small vessel had powered down and hidden itself amongst the wreckage of the two fleets when the _Artis di Aestus _had arrived. The craft was too far out of range of the Orbital MAC stations and the Fleet was tragically out of position at the L2 Defensive Line.

The sight of the small craft and its cargo of captive psykers entering the Anomaly felt like a physical wound to Lord Hood. When the Class-Four Ore Hauler detonated, it was a quiet thing. The explosion was barely visible due to the distance from Cairo Station and the roaring majesty of the Anomaly. The link to the Imperium of Man quaked and fluctuated before expanding violently. Every man, woman and child on Earth and in the Fleets heard the death scream echo in their mind. The Link collapsed.

They were alone.

15. Chapter 15

Well, it's been a while, but I finally managed to find the time to finish the chapter. None of my stories have been abandoned, I just don't have the time I once did to work on my stories.

As always, reviews are appreciated and will go a long way to faster updates.

* * *

><p>Installation 05

The Space Marines had advanced quickly over the broken and tortured ground of Halo. The Emperor's Chosen had left a veritable sea of broken Tyranids in their wake. Captain Thomas and his Imperial Fists and Scout Sergeant Bohn and his Howling Griffons scouts had fought in the manner of Astartes. They had struck with overwhelming force, utterly destroyed the foe and moved on to the next battle without celebration or rest.

Warin had been appraising the young Astartes waging war along side him. Brothers Ionnaes and Rhys were fighting only their third battle as full battle brothers. The two youths had first served with distinction in the shattered hives of Medusa V. Captain Thomas remembered when he had found the combat squad holding the steps of a District Imperial Basilica. The transit-paths were littered with the corpses of Heretics and thrice-damned Black Legionaries. The four surviving battle-brothers were standing over the broken form of Brother Ulysis. The fallen Imperial Fists still clutched his Heavy Bolter and according to his brothers had continued to fire even after receiving a mortal wound from a traitor autocannon. The Devastators had held their ground with the tenacity of Dorn himself. There was a bright future for his newest brothers.

Even as Warin judged the newest members to the Fourth Company, he was reviewing the Tactical data being fed to him by the In Amber Clad. Tyrannid and Flood activity had nearly overrun the entire Ring structure. Combat between human and Covenant forces had become exceedingly rare. There had been scattered and hate-filled combat between Commander Keyes' detachment and the Covenant. It was expected, for Keyes and the Covenant were after that most valuable of prizes. The Index. The small device had the power to eradicate all life in the Galaxy. The Covenant could not be allowed to light the Halo. They could not be allowed to erase humanity from existence or deny mankind their Manifest Destiny.

"Rolund to command." The very human voice of the young Howling Griffon scout crackled on the com. The later stages of Tyranno-forming had begun and raging electrical storms raged in the skies despite the attempts of Halo's systems to compensate. In the distance, a sickly haze hung over regions corrupted by the Flood.

"Command. Status?" Scout Sergeant Bohn replied.

"Brother-Sergeant, activity directly above your position. It appears the Flood are preparing a drop assault on the area."

Brother-Captain Warin looked to the 'skies'. In a break in the seemingly never ending storms, his helmet's inbuilt zoom confirmed the Flood were preparing for some kind of action.

Sergeant Bohn spoke into his vox. "Confirmed, Rolund." He then switched to the rest of the squad. "Get ready my boys. We're in for a bit of rain."

Covenant Assault Carrier Shadow of Intent

It was surprising to the Arbiter, but he could feel the taint seeping from the supposed Holy Ring. The image from space told the story as clear as any transmission. Huge swaths of the ring were either stripped bare of life or corrupted beyond reclamation by the Parasite.

Rtas Vadumee approached the Arbiter. "The sight is difficult to take in, Arbiter."

The Arbiter shook his head. "Aye, that it is. We can still salvage this monstrous situation. We can claim the Index and usher in the Great Journey."

Rtas clasped his hand on his comrade's shoulder. "Well said, Arbiter. But we must act quickly, the glorious Prophet of Regret has deployed Jiralhanae to the front lines. It is all our other brothers can do to contain their hotbloodedness."

"Then I suppose we should hurry. Our objectives, and enemies, are legion."

Rtas took a moment to absorb the sight of Halo. "Unfortunately, neither is time. But, we are Sangheli! There is no other military force that can match us. Our Forefathers have seized glorious victory from direr circumstances."

"That is true, Commander. What orders have we received from the Hierarchs?"

Rtas Vadumee clicked his mandibles. "The Index is our primary concern. You will be the Prophet's Speartip."

A younger Sangheli jogged down the corridor and bowed in the presence of his superiors. "Honored warriors, the Orbital Insertion Coffins and Phantoms are prepared."

Rtas Vadumee nodded sharply. "Very well, Minor Domo. May you find glorious battle, Arbiter and if you die, die well."

"The same, brother." The Arbiter said as he turned to head to the waiting Phantom.

Blood!

The sensation was clear in its meaning and intent. K'xon had experienced a similar sensation before encountering Sesa Refumee and when viewing the message from Oliak Krasinee.

"Commander Vadumee. The Corruption has a presence on the Ring. Be on your guard."

Rtas growled. "Is there no place this foul contamination has not spread to?!"

"It seems we shall all have our share of glory this day."

Vadumee lofted his Honor Blade. "We shall receive glory in battle or glory in death, Arbiter. It is the way of the Sangheli! I shall see you on the Ring."

The Arbiter saluted sharply and boarded the waiting Phantom. As the sleek Covenant lander exited the capital ship, the Arbiter realized he was charging into the gates of hell itself.

Glory indeed.

Unknown Forerunner Structure.

This isn't natural. Sergeant Johnson took a sip of his canteen as he reluctantly looked at the pulsing walls. It was dangerous to stop here, but some of the troopers couldn't keep going for much longer and the UNSC marines needed to divide ammo.

The grizzled NCO was proud of his troopers. They were conserving ammo as best they could, but with the number of Covenant, Tyranid beasties and nightmarish Flood they had encountered Johnson was surprised they even had any ammo left.

Commander Keyes fiddled with the Covenant Plasma Rifle she had scavenged. "How much ammo do we have left?"

"Not much. If we didn't have the Guard's laser rifles and knowledge about how to work Covie weapons, we'd probably be screwed."

Commander Keyes nodded. The fatigue was obvious. "We should keep moving. The flamer and melta cleared the Flood growth but I don't want to be here much longer."

Casimiro approached the officers. "I do have some fortunate news. It will lift the morale of the soldiers."

Avery looked up. "Then don't hesitate to share it. We need ****something**** to keep these kids going."

The giant nodded. He moved towards the collection of troops. "Fellow warriors, I bear good tidings. The Index is highly psychic. I have confirmed its location and we are close. Soon, it will be in our grasp. But we must remain vigilant. There are many enemies between us and our prize. The xenos will stop at nothing to stop us. But they will fail as they always have."

It wasn't the greatest battlefield speech in the history of humanity, but it did its job. The Librarian knew he wasn't the speaker a Chaplain or Commissar Halvorsen was, but the news was a noticeable boost to the troops. The confidence of the Chief Librarian of the Howling Griffons was a boost to the soldiers, especially the Guardsmen.

Sergeant Johnson stood up and walked over to the Librarian. "You can really sense the Index?"

Casimiro nodded. "Not as strongly as I could earlier. The Tyranid's Shadow in the Warp is spreading. The Hive Mind is growing in power as it consumes this Ring. If the Scouts can not complete their objective and destroy the Norn Queen, the Great Devourer will escape this place and a new dark age will descend upon us."

Commander Keyes smiled tiredly. "I hope Captain Thomas and his Space Marines meet up with your Scouts then."

The Space Marine took a small step forward. "Captain Thomas, of the Imperial Fists?"

Johnson nodded as he walked towards the returning Commissar Halvorsen. "That's him."

Casimiro smiled, for the first time genuinely. "Then he shall succeed."

Installation 05, Tyranid-Flood Warzone

Master Chief moved silently among the hellish wastes. He had been aware of the Flood Threat on the Original Halo, but had not expected it to spread so quickly and malignantly. The memories of the Flood Corruption of the Truth and Reconciliation were still vivid. That had been a disturbing enough experience, but to see the plants of Halo corrupted and turned into weapons in the War between the Flood and the Tyranids was unexpected. John found himself admitting he felt a tinge of ****unease**** at the experience. In the distance, a thorny vine whipped and tore into a Flood tentacle that had grown from the ground.

"Chief, there is another pool ahead. According to data from In Amber Clad, it's a Flood structure."

The SPARTAN grimaced under his helmet. It would be difficult to cross such Flood infested Territory. John was down to four frag grenades, 2 Plasma grenades, a Plasma Rifle and a submachine gun. It was an impressive arsenal, but it wasn't enough to cross the Flood or Tyranid Zones.

"Copy Cortana."

SPARTAN-117 moved quickly among a furrow torn into the ground by some horrible force. The air was thick with Flood Spores and smoke from hundreds of fires. The realization that Flood Corruption had overrun hundreds of planets in the Flood-Forerunner War made John realize the Halo Arrays might just have been necessary.

A feral cry wracked the air. John peered around the piece of cover he was using. A pack of Combat Forms trudged forward towards a trench line near John's position. A trio of strange Flood Forms John and Cortana hadn't seen before scuttled behind the Combat Forms and took position on a ridge. The strange Flood Forms suddenly grew what could only be described as roots. The three creatures began launching a cloud of spines into the haze of Tyranid Spores. John took advantage of the barrage to advance towards the opposite side of the Flood Battle Line. The thunderous sound of a mass of creatures filled the air.

Dozens, perhaps hundreds, of scythe-armed beasts fell to the rain of spines. The tsunami of chitinous predators swarmed forward despite losses and injury. At the moment the Tyranids entered range, the Combat forms opened fired. The Tyranids fell to the weight of fire, but there were hundreds more. John entered a dead sprint. He reached a relatively safe position just as the Tyranid charge smashed into the Flood Line.

John-117 turned and took in the battle raging behind him. The Flood were taking a horrific toll on the Tyranids. There were piles of the smaller combat forms piled 2 deep in some areas. Losses however were irrelevant to the Hive Mind. As long as the biomass was preserved, there would be no net loss.

The familiar whine of a formation of Covenant Ghosts screeched above the swirling melee. A wedge formation of jetbikes spat plasma into the flanks of the Hormagaunts. The Ghosts successfully blunted the Hormagaunts attack. Then a winged creature of Monstrous size landed in the midst of the Flood flanking attack. Its sheer size crushed a jetbike. The massive Tyranid swung a massive bony sword and killed numerous Flood in a single swing. In the distance, more large Tyranids advanced. Chief's motion tracker went mad. He turned just in time to see more Flood arrive.

Then the Tyranid Warrior arrived. The Chief rolled to avoid the first attack. John opened fire with his plasma rifle, but the energy shots failed to penetrate the extended carapace of the warrior. The Synapse creature was launched into a fevered assault. Master Chief succeeded in avoiding some of the blows, but several attacks battered the SPARTANS shields to dangerously low levels. The next moments were a blur as Master Chief found himself fighting the most primal battle of his long and bloody life.

Reality came crashing back when the Tyranid Warrior exploded. John

had fallen back on his training and done what had been necessary to win. In this case, he had shoved an armed frag grenade down the warrior's throat.

"Move Chief! We don't have the firepower to stay here!" Cortana's voice was under control as always.

The Spartan moved out. He contacted In Amber Clad for a resupply drop. Cortana also sent a single word transmission.

Hydra.

The Gate of Chaos

Tom and Lucy moved silently down the Tzeentchian region of the Gate of Chaos. The Forerunners had designed this area as a facility to study the physical universe. It was a center of scholarship. Thus, it was only natural, or as natural as Chaos could muster, that the Changer of Ways should lay claim to this region. Forerunner architecture was medicinally clean and precise. The ziggurat was now a maddening writhing collection of impossible angles and constantly shifting halls.

Though they moved silently, the Tzeentchians were never out of communication.

Tom, how long do you think the cull will take? The longer we delay here, the tighter the door of our vision closes.

The Astartes Sorcerer nodded. It shouldn't take long. The Nurglite fools refuse to take orders from anyone with Thousand Sons genesource. The Khornates are easy to bend to our purposes as long as they can charge headlong into the enemy. Slaanesh's followers and those of the Eightfold Path will be more problematic. But, you are correct, the window into the future grows cloudy.

Lucy flexed her newly gifted wings as a cascade of color danced across them. What is on Onyx? The Changer of Ways has been guiding our visions to that place.

I have wondered that as well. Something connected to the Forerunners no doubt. Perhaps a way to stop the Halo Arrays?

Lucy motioned for Tom and their retinue of Rubric Marines to stop. We were only chosen because we could further Tzeentch's goals on Onyx. Tom, do you feel that?

The Astartes stopped and called forth warp energy. The Rubric Marines responded to the thoughts of their masters and raised their bolters. A hunched and Elderly Magus hobbled from a dripping maw.

"Mistress, we have been expecting you. I shall lead you to our forces."

Lucy barely registered the Magus. "You do not lead me, Magus. You shall take me to the forces and await instructions do you understand?"

A sneer formed on the Magus's face, but quickly died as half of the Rubric Marines stepped between the cultists and Lucy. The Magus at

first believed that the Thousand Son was protecting his associate.

His expectations were shattered.

"It seems that we shall part for a while, Lucilla. I shall gather the Astartes and then we shall finally depart."

Lucy cringed at the use of her 'verbal' name. "Of course, Te'oma. Do not tarry, we are on a schedule."

The Astartes Sorcerer departed with out a word. Under his helmet, Tom laughed at the misery Lucy was going to unleash on the pawn of a Magus. The Magus took a step back as realization dawned on him

There were still four Rubric Marines pointing bolters at his head.

Sydney Australia

The airspace around Sydney Australia was filled with Imperial and UNSC craft. Commanders of the armies of Man were gathering to determine the fate of the species. General Sturnn sat silently as the Aquila Transport began its descent. He still wasn't sure why he had asked Tzavaras to accompany him. Was he being manipulated by the Doctor's unimaginable psychic powers?

Sturnn found himself wishing for a battlefield assignment to some besieged UNSC colony world. Everything was simpler on the battlefield.

The lander touched down and the hatch opened. A young naval soldier was waiting at the bottom of the ramp.

"General Sturnn. You and your advisors have a vehicle waiting to take you to the Strategic Conclave."

Sturnn nodded. "Very well, son."

Tzavaras placed his hand on Sturnn's shoulder. "General, we must part ways for a time."

"You are one of my advisors, Doctor." Sturnn was continually fighting the urge to ask Behar if he was Him.

"I am aware, General. However, there is someone else who will be requesting my attention."

The level of Doctor Tzavaras's prescient abilities continued to shock General Sturnn.

A young woman approached and her identity caused General Sturnn to grind his teeth. An Inquisitor.

"Doctor Behar Tzavaras, I've been expecting you."

"As have I, Inquisitor Acelia. Your vehicle is waiting."

The conversation was shockingly casual. "Of course, Doctor. If I may, shall I take you somewhere a bit more private? We have a great deal

to discuss."

Behar turned to General Sturnn. "By your leave, General?"

Sturnn and his command squad exchanged looks that betrayed their surprise. "Very well!"

The Inquisitor and the Doctor walked off in silence. The overly nervous naval recruit attempted small talk as the Guardsmen went their own ways.

Sister Helena of the Ordo Dialogous opened the door to the car waiting for the Inquisitor and her 'guest'. Acelia was cringing with the unbearable pain again. Her sacred mission was nearing completion.

The car's electric engine whined to life and got underway.

"The Mombasa anomaly was your doing was it not?"

Behar appraised the Inquisitor closely. "It was. Tell me, who do you serve? You carry a fragment of a powerful Warp Entity within you, but it is not the Enemy."

Acelia wept for a moment before a golden light flowed from her eyes and mouth.

"You cannot recognize yourself Amul?"

The voice was Behar's and Acelia smiled under the influence of the Soul Fragment. "I do not have much time. I must transfer the fragment of my soul into your's soon. The child cannot survive the stress of the terrible burden I placed upon her much longer."

The Light snaked its way into Behar. The voice, filled with the sorrow of 10,000 years, began to fade away. "Drink it deeply Amul and learn the tragedy of your Imperium."

Installation 05

Halo burned with combat. It was befitting such a place. The destiny of the Milky Way was teetering on the results of the war for the very soul of the Forerunner's Sword.

Captain Thomas crashed into yet another Flood Combat form. The teeth of his Chainsword tore deep into the corrupted flesh of what was once an Elite. All around him, the Astartes were purging the Parasite from Man's Galaxy. The Scout's heavy bolter roared it's defiance at an uncaring universe as it excised dozens of Infection forms with each blessed bolt's detonation. Brother Van's bolt pistol destroyed a blasphemous puppet mocking the sacred form of humanity. The Flood assault, which Scout Sergeant Bohn had declared a rain had become a monsoon.

Suddenly, like a violent storm is wont to do, it ended. After an assault that lasted for hours, the rain of Flood Pods simply stopped. Warin looked to the opposing side of Halo and activated his helmet's magnifiers. A series of detonations ravaged the Flood's position.

"It appears the Covenant has made the grave error of helping us save our ammunition." One of the Scouts quipped.

Segeant Bohn checked his magazine and made a sharp hand motion. "Stay focused!"

The Imperial Fists captain gave a terse order to move out. He made a mental note of the pattern and timing of the explosions that halted the Flood's Drop Assault. The xenos commander was skilled. It would be an honor to kill such a foe.

On the other side of Halo, R'tas Vadumee appraised the results of his strike. There had been something distracting the Parasite. The Supreme Special Operations Commander knew that his Sangheli warriors could easily defeat the Parasite and any other foe. However, he was grateful that he could conserve the lives of his brothers.

"Commander Vadumee to Shipmaster Reulee. What threat was drawing off the Parasite? I need to know if it was a major Locust assault."

The voice of Shipmaster Reulee filled the Communications veil of Rtas. "Negative Locust assault, Commander. It was a small force of Human Demons."

Rtas snapped his mandibles. "Impossible. Most burned on Reach or are rushing to defend the few worlds we have not burned."

"I do not doubt that Commander, but Seraph patrols have reported multiple sightings of Human Demons."

Rtas growled. "We shall cleanse them!" Rtas switched to his team's frequency. "Brothers, steel yourselves! The humans have summoned their Demons to battle us! Honor your forebearers through Victory! Exalt the Forerunners with the deaths of the human warriors!"

Forerunner Monorail Station

The Arbiter was the first of the assault force to descend the Phantom's gravity chute. The assault force fanned out and secured the perimeter.

"Arbiter, your mission is obvious. Clear a path and secure the Sacred Icon." Tartarus bellowed over the communications link. The Chieftain of the Brutes was not even attempting to hide his contempt for the Elites. Normally, the Jiralhanae would at least feign respect for the position of Arbiter and his Elite superiors.

The Jiralhanae are advancing their heresy faster than expected. The thought was a bitter pill for K'xon. The necessity of Councilor N'gyven's retrieval of the Relic Weapons was becoming more and more evident.

In order to save the Covenant, the Elites would have to break it.

"I understand _Chieftain_. The destiny of the Covenant depends on my actions."

Tartarus sneered on board his Phantom. "I am glad we understand each

other, Sangheli."

The voice harbored no secrets. A reckoning was in store between the Sangheli and Jiralhanae. There could be no avoiding that course now.

One of the Major Domos activated a console and recalled the tram. "Arbiter, the tram is reactivated and is returning to station. According to the records, the last beings to use this tram were the Blessed Forerunners."

It was a good portent. Unfortunately, the horrors of this Fallen Ring would likely make the wait for the tram a battle. The dozen Elites maintained a solid defensive formation and waited.

They did not have to wait long.

"BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!" The cry was animalistic in intent.

Scores of crazed humans charged from the shadows firing their deceptively dangerous solid slug weapons. The Elites had confidence in their Personal Energy shields but took proper positions and returned fire. Many fell to the precise volleys of fire. However, others continued to advance in their mindless desire to spill blood.

"Maintain fire discipline!" The Arbiter counseled his fellow warriors as the horribly corrupted humans charged towards the Sangheli position.

K'xon attached his carbine to the magnetic clips on his armor and drew his honor blade mere moments before the tide of abominations reached melee range. The human's charge was surprisingly fierce. The Arbiter barely managed to sidestep a vicious downward attack. Sparks flew from the impact of the spinning blades of the human's ax on the ground. K'xon's honor blade punched through the bronzed armor of the enemy. The impact and the Sangheli's natural strength lifted the corrupted human a foot off the ground.

Then he saw it. The hated symbol. An eight pointed star and a strange skull-like rune were crudely carved over all of the human government's symbols.

The bellows of the Sangheli and the foul war cries of the debased humans filled the air.

"Cleanse these creatures, brothers!" An Elite cried out as he smashed the skull of an enemy against the wall. His proud call to arms was cut short as one of the vicious chain axes tore into his back. Shields flared under the assaults and human and Sangheli blood splashed against the walls.

The wrongness of the combat was overwhelming to K'xon. He had fought dozens of battles against the humans and killed hundreds by his own hands. This was no battle. This was primal conflict. There was no grand objective. Proud Sangheli warriors were not fighting to secure a blessed artifact of the Forerunners. The humans were not carrying out their usual noble, yet futile resistance.

Only one thing mattered in this fight: survival.

After several frenzied minutes of combat, the tram arrived. The only sound was the humming of the tram's anti-gravity unit. In the strange tranquil moment, the Arbiter realized the humans had never been an _enemy_. They had been a foe. These debased creatures had bartered any nobility the humans may have had for madness and power. The humans weren't the cancer eating away at the Covenant. It was true that the Humans, as a foe, were causing the fractures to appear.

Oracle Master Yeur's mission was the Sangheli's greatest chance for victory. It was a strange sensation, realizing that words might just accomplish what force of arms could not.

Unnamed world at the edge of the Gate of Chaos

Djakarta and Ator waddled down the ramp and breathed deeply of the contaminated air. It was the world Uncle Nebnua Uymbi had directed them to liberate. The sky boiled and rolled with the raw energy of Chaos.

"I remember this world. The False Prophets 'generously' gave our people this world to settle. Then they stood by as those damned Sangheli descended on _our_ colony and reduced us to chattel." Djakarta roared.

Ator simply nodded knowing that he was in the presence of one of Nurgle's chosen and eager to hear any message his brother in pestilence spoke.

"However, our people were always destined to embrace the Plague Father. No other species in this galaxy can endure as we can."

Ator nodded in awed agreement. The pair traveled among the shifting hell-scape. They spread pestilence as they went. Eventually they reached an abandoned habitat.

Djakarta stopped and raised a bloated hand to signal Ator to come to a halt. The other Plague Brute raised his Maulers.

Djakarta growled. "A pawn of the Trickster God is polluting this place."

A giant avian figure walked around the corner. The rhythm of its massive staff striking the ground was the only sound for a moment.

"Why must all you mammals be so infuriating? I thought that bloodcrazy human was bad, but this..."

Djakarta roared. "For the Plague Father!" The Jiralhanae was aware of the fighting between the capricious followers of the other gods and the rest of Nurgle's Family.

Corroded grenades shot from Djakarta's Brute shot. The Lord of Change quickly conjured a barrier of pure sorcery.

"Oh shut up and listen. Did your patron, Nebnua Uymbi not inform you of the other Diplomats? I am Tzeentch's Messenger and I come to give you this."

A flick of the wrist caused a scroll to materialize. "When you next speak with your 'Uncle', make sure he gets this. It's just a tad bit important."

The Nurglite approached the Greater Daemon and greedily snatched the scroll. "Depart, foul creature. I despise you and what you stand for."

In an instant, the Lord of Change was eye level with Djakarta. "The feeling is mutual. I long for the day when I am released to my own plots. I assure you, mortal, your destruction is assured."

"All plans succumb to the inevitable entropy, pawn."

The Daemon simply smiled and disappeared in an inferno of witchfire.

Ator walked up behind his brother. "And I thought the Sangheli were the most wretched creatures in this galaxy."

Djakarta snarled and moved on. After traveling for several hours, Nurgle guided them to a collection of hovels. The pair began to search the village. An elderly Jiralhanae of Chieftain rank emerged from a hut.

"Name your tribe and step forward!"

Djakarta spread his arms wide. "I am of the tribe of Nurgle. I belong to a tribe that transcends all. Nurgle has opened my eyes to the bondage of the Covenant! This world was suppose to be _ours!_ And lo, the Sangheli tore our worlds from us! The False Prophets did nothing! There is only One who truly cares for us! **Nurgle! All praise to the Plague Father!**"

The aging Chieftain activated his Gravity Hammer and thumped his chest. "Cease your Blasphemies! The Prophets lifted us from our squalor! Look at you! You are diseased! You should not be standing!"

Djakarta inclined his head. He would show them! He would bring the pestilent embrace of Nurgle to his kindred. The tribe was emerging from their hovels. Djakarta and the Chieftain's debate had enthralled them to the point where they ignored the tides of Chaos energy threatening to engulf their world.

"I would not be standing if not for the generous Hand of Nurgle! His gifts have removed the fear of pain! The fear of death! Our Plague Father has shown me through His gifts the simple pleasures and beauty of life!"

The Mortal Herald stepped towards the crowd. There was fear in their eyes, but there was also something else. They were experiencing utter despair. One final push, and they would embrace Nurgle with every part of their being.

The Chieftain roared and charged Djakarta. A cloud of daemon-flies erupted from festering boils of Nurgle's messenger and engulfed the Chieftain. The elder was swinging wildly at the cloud of biting insects. Djakarta rushed forward and drove the blade of his Brute

Shot into the gap between the older Jiralhanae's neck and poorly maintained armor. The older Brute's death was agonizing as the demon flies did their horrid work.

Djakarta plucked the Gravity Hammer from the former Chieftain's dead hands and hefted it above his head. "Nurgle is the source of my power. It can be yours! But you must endure! Can you endure?"

A young male cried out from the mass of Jiralhanae. "We will!"

Djakarta cried out to Nurgle and a small Warp Rift appeared above the hovels. A grey mass of flies descended from Nurgle's Manse.

The Jiralhanae endured.

The _Pious Inquisitor_

Richard stalked the halls of the Covenant vessel hunting for anything to kill. So far, he had only encountered Engineers. Those bulbous wretches were useless to Khorne. They had no natural blood as they were constructs of the Forerunners.

The Bloody Handed Berserker exulted the bloodstained halls of the Covenant ship. It had become a suitable altar to the Blood God. The Bloody Handed Berserker raged that there was nothing left to kill.

After several hours prowling the halls in desperation for something to kill, the Berserker returned to the bridge. Skalletjuv, the Daemon bound within Wright's ax, joined the roar of his new Hellblade. The Daemons demanded blood. They demanded more offerings to The Soul Eater's throne.

The Covenant vessel's computer spat something in the xenos' tongue. It took a moment, but Skalletjuv barked the translation. There was an undeniable sense of _joy _in the Daemon's translation.

_Weeping Shadows of Sorrow. A prison world. A _violent _prison world_.

Richard roared. As his wordless cry of joy echoed, the skulls of Oliak Krasinee, the Bloodletter Herald and other worthy opponents knocked against each other. The human stabbed the Hellblade into the bridge's central console. Chaos corruption exploded through the ship. As the _Pious Inquisitor _succumbed to daemonic possession, Richard aimed the ship directly at the planet.

"**MAIM KILL BURN! MAIM KILL BURN!**"

Weeping Shadows of Sorrow

Rickatus barred his teeth and slammed a gauntleted fist on the console. That damned Sangheli ship wasn't responded to any transmissions.

"Get one of the Sangheli officers up here!" The Jiralhanae hissed. A Minor Brute rushed to carry out his Chieftain's command.

A heartbeat later, a Sangheli Major Domo entered the room followed

closely by several Minor Domos.

"What do you require, Chieftain?" The tone was both mocking and dismissive.

"Talk to your damned ship. The _Pious Inquisitor _is one of your garbage scows isn't it!"

The Minor Domo's eyes went wide. "The _Pious Inquisitor!_"

Ricatus stomped forward. "YES! Is your race so dense that you can't comprehend simple speech?!"

Minor Domo Triak Moilonee barked something in Sangheli battle language. "I just received word from my Father on High Charity. The _Pious Inquisitor _was boarded by an unknown enemy! It is no longer sanctified!"

Rickatus signed a terse command to his warriors. The Jiralhanae and Sangheli barely managed to leave the room without coming to blows. "You kept that vital information from me!"

"I. Didn't. Know. Until. Now!"

One of the remaining Jiralhanae looked up from the Communications Bench. "We are finally receiving transmissions..."

"Tell the damned Captain to enter standard orbit." Rickatus shouted.

"He won't listen." The Brute hit a switch. A dark chant filled the tower.

****MAIM KILL BURN! MAIM KILL BURN! MAIM KILL BURN! MAIM KILL BURN!****

The atmosphere burned as the Assault Carrier bore down on the Prison Complex.

"By the Hierarchs..." A primal horror gripped both Rickatus and Triak stared open mouthed at the defiled Assault Carrier. The forward edge of the ship was now a terrifying skull. It was clear that the enemy that had claimed the _Pious Inquisitor_ was not a natural foe.

In the prison yard, the Jiralhanae and Sangheli factions looked up. Their normal battle postponed as the humongous spacecraft roared over. Scores of drop pods erupted from random gates. The drop did not have the measured precision of a Sangheli assault or the overwhelming force directed at a single point like a Brute attack. Confusion ruled as the pods struck across the prison.

Confusion became utter shock as the Orbital Pods disgorged their passengers.

"Humans?" A Sangheli said the word as if it was poison.

One of the humans had landed in the dead center of the prison yard. The human's eyes, the Covenant prisoners assumed the creature was human at least, were solid black orbs. It was wearing a bronzed variant of the standard human combat suit. Instead of ranged weapons,

he carried a whirring toothed ax and a sword that glowed with an unholy light.

Other humans emerged from their pods. They all hefted their weapons and waited for a signal.

"**CHOSEN OF KHORNE! FEAST ON THEIR FLESH!**" Richard the Bloody Handed screamed as the heavens were torn asunder. Torrents of Blood rained from the sky and in the distance, the beating of a massive drum filled the air.

The humans charged and hell followed with them.

Oort Cloud, Sol System

The Slipspace rupture subsided quickly. The Oracle Master Yeur stared into the void. It was strange arriving in the home system of the humans. Yeur's last battle before age demanded a new aspect of his service to his people and Covenant was against the humans. A Kig'Yar privateer had stumbled upon one of their colonies and by chance, had detected a Forerunner artifact. In an attempt to gain profit and standing in the Covenant, they had launched an attack.

The Kig'Yar, being merely mercenaries and of hollow faith, were nearly wiped out by the tenacious human defenders. If they had not sent a desperate transmission, the Jackals would have been destroyed to the final soldier. Yeur and his small fleet arrived within a few days of the call for reinforcements.

The Oracle Master's final battle was glorious. The humans tested his warriors. They never surrendered and fought with complete mastery of their fear. The marines launched attack after attack knowing that they were dead. The human ships and soldiers managed to buy enough time for their noncombatants to escape.

Ironically, that while he burned dozens of human worlds, he was now going to try to save the world at their very heart.

Yeur turned to the captain of the vessel. "It is time. Enter the system, broadcast the message. The humans should not have defenses this far voidward."

The Shipmaster nodded. "As you wish Oracle Master."

Yeur only nodded as the Frigate advanced towards its demise.

UNSC Defense Installation Epsilon-7

The assembled UNSC Defense Force personnel and Imperial soldiers milled around the room trading data and discussing the defense of Earth. It was only a matter of time before the Covenant and or Chaos attacked. The military was planning their defenses based off both sides attacking at the same time or nearly the same time.

One of the first acts of the Joint Command was to send the two colony vessels out on a random vector with an escort. The mass of civilians would be a liability in the coming battle. The UNSC and Imperium would not allow innocents to be butchered by the Covenant or sacrificed in the names of the Dark Gods.

The murmur of several dozen high ranking officers was suddenly overshadowed by a roaring klaxon. The AI of the facility appeared in one of the holographic projectors at the room's center.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, Io has detected a Slipspace Rupture in the Oort Cloud." Before the officers could move to combat positions, the AI raised his hands. "The station reports that the only ship is a Covenant Frigate. It has been broadcasting a message, quite loudly I must add, requesting a meeting."

"It must be destroyed!" An UNSC captain shouted.

"**No, it must not.**" A voice of unimaginable perfection echoed through the room. The doors to the meeting room opened and a lone figure entered.

The room fell silent and only a single Imperial General from Tallaran was heard. "Can it..."

The giant strode forth and a heartbeat later two other armored figures entered.. The majesty of their golden armor nearly blinded those closest to them. Several of the Sanctioned Psykers began to weep and many of the Imperials began to pray.

"**If the Sangheli were here for battle, they would not send a single Frigate. Admiral Obvi Kaal, you shall not fire. Your Emperor commands it.**"

As one, the Imperials kneeled before their Emperor. Behar closed his eyes as the looming abyss of the future yawned before him.

16. Chapter 16: Now 110 More Zombified!

Seongnam, Korea

Magos Micel intoned the Litany of Transference as he rerouted a power cable from one section of the damaged JOTUN to another. He had discovered this tragically wounded machine in one of the storage centers of the Seongnam Research Facility. The upgrades on the Orbital Platforms had been completed ahead of schedule thanks to the assistance of hundreds of the UNSC's strong and portable Machine Spirits and the multitude of Techpriest and Servitors. Magos Micel's tasks were completed and he arrived at Seongnam to admire the Omnisiah's bounty.

He would have eased the noble machine's stoic suffering in any case, but when he discovered that this machine was the only surviving JOTUN of _Harvest,_ he threw himself at the sacred task of restoring this witness to history.

The eccentric Magos smiled as he called upon the Omnisiah in a burst of binary.

Machine Spirit! Can you hear me? I am Magos Brafor Micel of the Adeptus Mechanicus.

/Query received...

/Query Logged Magos Micel was taken aback. A second Machine Spirit

was present in the JOTUN!

The disciple of the Omnisiah worked at a fevered pitch uttering simplistic prayers to the Deus Mechanicus. He would offer the theologically required offerings and prayers when he was finished, but he knew time was not on his side. He activated a program stored in one of his augmentations. It was a UNSC program created by a Dr. Halsey for the creation of smart AIs. The Adeptus Mechanicus worked with a sense of urgency that he had never had working on simple cognitors or even the primary networking systems on the Forge World of Lir Kalasq.

After intensive repairs to the code, Brafor attempted to contact the pair of machine spirits.

Machine Spirits. Can you respond?

I feel like I got run over by a stampeding bull, but I'm functional. The first AI responded.

My functionality has been restored. Thank you. The second joined the digital conversation.

Magos Micel smiled in triumph. His attempted repairs were unheard of in all of the data the techpriest had accessed. He noted in one of his memory units to inform both Arc-Magos Gho and the UNSC of his accomplishment.

Would you share your designation?

The AIs interfaced with the link connecting them directly to Magos Micel's mind.

The first AI was a twangy male voice. "Howdy! I'm known as Mack. Nice to meet you partner."

"I am known as Sif. It is a pleasure." The feminine voice had a slightly haughty edge to it.

Mack gave the impression of a grin. "Well, 'Magos', mind telling us where the hell we are and who exactly you are and why you have several dozen computer drives installed into your spine?"

Installation 05, Covenant Line of Control

Rher stared down the barrel of his beam rifle. He and his squad mates had been assigned 'penance' for laxity by the Sangheli Honor Guard Ultra. Now, Rher and his associates found themselves acting as forward observers at the shoreline.

Rher was perched in the branches of a large tree. The others were spread out along the edge of the forest looking for any sign of the many enemies on this supposedly 'Holy' Ring.

Yreks, one of the other Kig-Yar, preened his thin feathers. "I cannot stand Sangheli! An entire race without an eye for profit. All they care about is 'glory'. What is glorious about charging madly into a swarm of the Parasite?"

Wrax crowed. "It's madness. Now, finding some female with thick neck calluses... That's _glorious."_

Rher swept the coast with his rifle as he called down to the others. "Instead, we're stuck here. Why did you idiots have to make so much noise! We could have gotten some relics and sold them back on High Charity. Imagine, an entire mating season..."

The Jackal's neck was broken with little effort. Master Chief managed to break the alien's thin spine with his right hand and catch the falling beam rifle with his left. Before the other Kig-Yar could react, two of them had been brained by the particle beam. Wrax raised his shield in time to deflect one of the beams. The other surviving Kig-Yar were running for the cover of the jungle squawking as they ran. John dropped from the tree a few feet in front of one of the retreating Jackals. The human super soldier aimed low and fired a burst of Plasma into the exposed legs. The Jackal collapsed screeching in pain. Chief put a single M7 round into his head and moved on.

"Chief, we are definitely behind the Covenant Line of Control. I've arranged for _In Amber Clad _to drop some supplies nearby."

"Affirmative Cortana."

There was almost _relief_ in John's voice. After nearly a day fighting through the Tyranid and Flood War zone, there was a part of the Spartan that was grateful to see the Covenant. He had been fighting the Covenant nearly his entire life. He _knew_ the Covenant. Elites and Grunts would use intelligent tactics when trying to flush Chief from an entrenched position. Chief could use the environment to isolate the individual attacks before destroying them. The Flood and the Tyranids didn't need to use intelligent tactics generally. He had discovered to his chagrin that both hordes _could _and _would _use intelligent tactics, but most of the time they would attempt to drown their enemy under weight of their endless numbers.

In the distance, the _thud_ of the supply pods slamming into the ground could be heard. Master Chief moved silently through the Tyranno-formed brush. After a moment, he arrived in a Forerunner plaza. It was practically empty, save for a clutch of Grunts and a pair of Sangheli overseers.

"Chief! I've got Marine IFFs across the plaza. There's an Imperial Guard Vox with them."

"Can you raise them on the vox?"

Cortana's voice was smug. "Can you jump a Warthog over a flaming pile of debris while the Flood fires Fuel Rod Cannons and then jump into a Longsword as Alpha Halo collapses around you?"

John 'humphfed' as he moved into position.

"Attention mixed Imperial Guard and UNSC Marine unit, this is Cortana. Please Respond."

There was silence on the other line. "Affirmative 'Cortana'. How is the Theban?"

Cortana's voice changed from its earlier smug tone to one of confusion. "Theban? I know that the Imperial Guard isn't familiar with UNSC terminology, but the Master Chief is a SPARTAN."

"This is Sergeant Kolak. I just had to make sure it was actually you. What is your status, over."

Master Chief responded first. "Green, sir."

Cortana took a quick simulation breath. "We need your help Sergeant. You no doubt detected the supply drop. We need your help in quickly securing it before moving on to assault the Prophet of Regret."

"So, we get to off a Prophet. Sgt. Keller's boys are as game as mine. It looks like there are a few Split-lips and a whole bunch of Fodder. We've got a mortar and a plasma gun. I suggest you advance as we lay down suppressing fire."

The voice of Sgt. Keller joined the vox conversation. "My squad also has a few SPANKr rockets left and a sniper. We'll hit that Jackal position across the way. Don't want any of those squawking bastards to hit us while we're dealing with the Elites."

Master Chief nodded. "It's a plan. Contact us with a non-verbal signal when your squads are ready."

The 'non-verbal' signal was a very Imperial one. One of the Shade Turrets was struck dead on by a mortar shell and exploded. Las and solid slug fire tore into a huddle of Grunts. Missile and sniper fire raked the far side of the ridge where a group of Jackals had taken position. Master Chief exploded from cover firing on any target of convenience. The Sangheli, unsurprisingly, were the last surviving aliens. A Major Domo trained his Covenant Carbine on the charging Master Chief and was rewarded for his bravery by an orb of billowing Plasma. The charred remains of his lower body collapsed to the ground as the twin hammer blows of a Mortar near miss and a SPANKr Rocket shredded the second Elite.

The Imperial Guardsmen and UNSC Marines met Master Chief in the center of the plaza and collected the supply drop.

One of the Guardsmen clipped a few frag grenades to his belt. "You know, it's moments like this that remind me just why humans rule the galaxy."

Corporal Alvarez reloaded his SPANKr. "We don't rule this Milky Way yet."

"Yet." Responded Sergeant Keller with a broad smile.

High Charity, Jiralhanae Quarter

It was a rare thing for such a gathering to be called. The last time the Alpha Chieftains had been assembled in one place was when Tartarus, current Chieftain of The Brutes had surpassed his uncle to claim the title. That was at the opening of the war against the Unclean Heathen Humans. Through the years of war, several smaller assemblies had been held. Almost all of them had been forums to rage against the Sangheli and their oppression of the Jiralhanae.

None of them had been this official. None of them had been led by Tartarus himself.

None in living memory had been graced with the presence of a _Prophet_.

Chieftain Brackitus, dubbed King of Hybris for his capture of the human mining facilities in the Hybris system, entered the cavernous chamber. At his back was the comforting weight of his Gravity Hammer and at his sides were his sons Ricat and Djerit. Other Chieftains of renown, Joratus the Linebreaker who broke the Renegade Kig'Yar lines on H'rata'k, Trekatus the Stalwart who held the line on the Relic world of Kresita against the Parasite, entered the chamber. The might and pride of the Jiralhanae had assembled for this gathering!

Moments after the subtle and not so subtle jockeying for position subsided, Tartarus the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae escorted the Prophet of Deception into the cavern. The Alpha of Alphas was blessed not only with his graying fur, a symbol of wisdom but by his favor with the Hierarchs themselves. The mighty Chieftain carried the Fist of Rukht the greatest of Gravity Hammers at his side. The Fist was as much a symbol of authority as a weapon of war.

It would be foolish and suicidal to think of the Fist of Rukht as simply a symbol of office. The Chieftain was Chieftain through force of arms as much as personality and vision.

The Prophet of Deception was almost comical next to the giant Jiralhanae. San'Shyuum were physically frail, but the weakness of their bodies acted as a balance to the strength of their souls. They could never move mountains with their body's strength.

They didn't need to. The unfathomable strength of faith could accomplish what their bodies never could. San'shyuum were the Covenant species with the closest connection to the Forerunners. It was their wisdom that led the Covenant along The Path. The Prophet of Deception was amongst the wisest of a wise species. He lounged in his hoverchair and to the untrained eye, appeared dangerously lazy. He was dangerous. Deception headed the spies and secret police of the Covenant. It was he who ruled the shadows that the luminance of the Covenant cast.

"**Brothers!**" Tartarus boomed. The murmuring of the Alpha Brutes ended.

Tartarus nodded. "Thisâ€¦ This is the day we as a species has dreamed of! Today!" His voice was rising as the sheer _joy_ of his announcement entailed.

"Today, the unjust shackles of the Sangheli have been shattered! No longer shall the Sangheli dictate the destiny of _our_ _packs! No longer shall they dictate the destiny of _The Covenant_ itself!_"

Tartarus's roaring announcement shocked the normally boisterous Brutes into silence. The Prophet of Deception's hoverchair slid forward.

"Your Chieftain does not make this declaration lightly! This is the Will of the Hierarchs themselves! They could not be here in the flesh for fear that the Sangheli would act against them. Blessed Regret is in the process of sanctifying one of the Sacred Rings! The Wise Mercy and Magnanimous Truth are attempting to prevent the tragedy that looms at the precipice. You have heard rumors of the Sangheli ignoring the Writ of Union and gathering prohibited weapons and armor. These are no rumors. Sangheli Councilors are planning on seizing the Covenant."

The Jiralhanae raged at the Prophet's revelation. There had never been any real connection between the Jiralhanae and the Sangheli beyond their nominally shared faith. Even that supposed connection was tenuous. The Sangheli had grown decadent after years of uncontested dominance. Their faith was hollow.

Jiralhanae were recent additions to the Covenant. The faith of the Brutes still burned hot. Brackitus viewed his faith as the rock upon which he was anchored. If the Prophet of Deception was about to announce what Brackitus thoughtâ€¦|

"The Prophets admire the Faith of the Jiralhanae! Was it not a Jiralhanae ship that secured the first victory of our Long Holy War? Was it not Trekatus who smashed the accursed Flood on Kresita? No Sangheli secured the human mines and broke their shipyards on Hybris! The Jiralhanae are not wallowing in Heresy! I say to you, champions of the Faith, that the Hierarchs have declared that the Brutes and not the Elites shall be the Vanguard of the Great Journey! Soon! Soon Great and Noble Champions, the portents shall warrant your actions to save Our Covenant! When these portents arise, you may despair. But keep heart o mighty warriors! Your steadfast devotion shall not only deliver you from the darkness, but all the species of this Blessed Union!"

The chamber erupted in adulation of their Chieftain and of the Prophets. Tartarus had spoken truly when he had declared this a day of destiny.

"My Brothers! The time is upon us! Gather your ancestral armor! Wear it proudly! Gather the weapons of our people! Wield them with honor! Victory shall be our watchword, despair the Sangheli's! Salvation and justice shall be our rewards! Damnation of judgment theirs! We act soon, my kin! Glory to the Covenant! We Shall Walk The Path!"

"**We Shall Walk the Path!**" The chamber roared and the Prophet of Deception smiled as his designs marched ever forward.

Installation 05

The blasphemous form of the Tyranid Hive Ship loomed in the distance. Numberless flocks of Tyranid Gargoyles filled the skies. Occasionally, the Space Marines saw the fearsome sight of a brood of Winged Tyranid Warriors.

Two of the scouts emerged from the alien brush.

"Sergeant, Brother-Captain. We have uncovered what we believe to be a way to assault the Tyranid Vessel."

Brother Captain Thomas nodded. "I shall consider it."

The scout nodded. "There is a Forerunner structure that runs underneath the ridge. It is large enough for our force to move through but will restrict the access for larger Tyranid Creatures until the Raveners and other burrowing xenofoms can widen it."

Sergeant Bohn pulled a pair of rangefinders from the webbing of his carapace armor. "The entrance is less than a klick away. We shouldn't have a problem reaching it. Have you reconnoitered an extraction point?"

The second Astartes Initiate nodded. "Aye, brother. There is a second Forerunner facility further along the tunnel system. It is large enough for a Thunderhawk to extract us."

Brother Captain Thomas nodded. "Your Strike Cruiser, when is it scheduled to return?"

Sergeant Bohn continued scanning the approach noting the movements of the Tyranids and making note of areas Lictors and Raveners were likely to launch ambushes. "Nine hours. If we had not succeeded in our task of preventing the enemies of man in this place, _Primarch's Deliverance_ was to conduct Exterminatus."

The Captain of the Imperial Fists understood the gravity of the situation. "A sound plan. This Halo is a weapon. It is a knife at the throat of humanity."

Brother Vann trained his bolter on a patrolling tide of Rippers dragging a hideous Flood Form towards a digestion pool. "My Captainâ€¦ How will we ensure the detonation of the atomic device?"

Thomas patted an ornate pattern on his gauntlet. "My armor has a teleport homer. _Primarch's Deliverance_ should be able to lock onto my signal and teleport me to safety."

Sergeant Bohn checked the magazine on his Bolter. "Your plan has merit and is our best chance to cripple the Hive Ship so it cannot escape the bombardment."

"Then we are decided. Move! As your Primarch Guilliman spake, strike with fury and secure victory before the enemy is aware of your attack! As Dorn spake, always be steadfast in your attacks! Never waver! Never surrender!"

The Marines burst from the cover and move as quickly as possible over the broken and tortured ground. As they advanced, the Tyranids became enraged at their presence. Gaunts and their Zoanthrope minders burst from horrific pulsing brood nests. They were met with Bolter and Plasma. Suddenly, a whine filled the air. Instinctively, the Space Marines took cover. A flight of Covenant Banshees launched a strafing run on the assembled Tyranids and human super-soldiers. A gaggle of Gaunts disappeared when a fuel rod detonated in their mists. The Attendant Zoanthrope hissed as it was flash-fried by a direct hit from Brother Rhys' Plasma Cannon.

In the Banshees, the Sangheli pilots reported their attack to Rtas Vadumee.

"Sir, we have engaged the Locust and a group of human Demons!"

Rtas, for his part, was on board a Phantom speeding to the combat zone. "Excellent. Burn their taint from this holy ring!"

"Affirmative, Commander!" The lead Banshee responded. Proximity alarms blared in his helmet. Something as large as a Banshee was rapidly approaching. The incoming contact did not have any IFF signal.

"Brothers, does anyone have a visual of the contact?"

The far left Banshee responded first. "Negative! Wait! By the Rings, how can such a creature staaaaaa!" An enormous winged monster emerged from one of the flocks high above the Banshee flight. It was as large or larger than the Banshees and had massive scythe like talons. A deafening roar escaped from its horned head as it removed one of the talons from the crumpled Banshee. It pushed off one and attacked the next closest Banshee in a maddened frenzy.

The Covenant Fliers dove and scattered. "Brothers, engage at will!"

The Flight Lead maneuvered behind the creature and prepared to engage it with his Fuel Rod Cannon when the devil wrapped its wings tight against its body and fell towards the surface of the Sacred Ring. The two other Banshees attempted to follow but were ambushed by a volley of Tyranid Spore Mines fired from a plodding group of Biovores. The acid carried by the mindless spores ate through the Banshees. The leader banked off.

"Commander Vadumee! The Locusts have claimed more of our brothers. I am repositioning to escort your craft."

"Affirmative." The Flocks of Gargoyles were descending on the sole surviving Banshee.

The Phantom Flight skimmed the ground as it advanced on the center of Locust activity.

The Locust had stripped this region completely bare. Only their fleshy towers and the animalistic behemoth of a ship were alive on the ground. The Prophet of Regret had made it clear that the 'Tyranids' as the humans called them could not be allowed to escape Halo.

Rtas Vadumee activated his Honor Blade. "Maintain course and speed. We cannot avoid taking hits from all of the Locust fire, but we can minimize damage."

The pilots responded and the Special Operations Commander of the Covenant turned his attention to the gunnery crews.

"Target the large Overseers. The slave-beasts are a minor concern."

Rtas rolled his neck. The Locusts did not concern him. He was focused solely on his reckoning with the Human Demons.

Gate of Chaos

The Cult-Magos had recovered from his initial shock enough to lead Lady Lucilla to the assembled Holy Warriors. There was a part of him that could not believe Lucilla actually commanded any Rubric Marines. However, he was a scion of Chaos and with Chaos all things were possible. He knew he could not match her powers yet. He would follow her.

For now.

Incense filled the air and enticed the senses. Lucilla rolled her eyes at the display. They were pandering to all the Chaos Gods with such a shallow display. The incense was made of a combination of human blood, excrement, a few sexual discharges and a minor hallucinogen. This was obviously a test from Tzeentch. Yes, it was a test of her patienceâ€¦|.

She did have to admit the force was much larger than expected. Khornate warriors alone numbered in the low thousands. Nurgle's forces were thinned. This, however, was expected as the pogrom against the Plague Father and his followers had just ended. The Lord of Entropy had obviously angered the other gods in a mighty way to invite such retaliation against him. The Winged Magister of the Architect of Fate was pleased that there were 189 minor psykers dedicated to Tzeentch assembled. The psykers overall weakness was troubling, but she did not expect any of them to have a fraction of Tom's power or her own. She knew their role would be to congregate and combine their powers to a useable level.

Then there was the Slaaneshi throng. They writhed in one giant ball of carnal lust. Lucy shook her head. The Prince of Pleasure was young in this galaxy and her followers were desperately trying to increase their patron's powers. It was still no excuse for being so short sighted. The only Slaaneshi worshipper who seemed to even be attempting to pay attention was a young woman who danced and contorted around the mass of mortals. At least she would look towards the podium where the leaders of the force were gathering in between servicing whatever nearby human caught her attention.

As always, the followers of Chaos Undivided had the largest contingent. There must have been thousands of them. Yesâ€¦| This would be a passable force, especially with Tom's Astartes band. Lucy frowned as she thought of her closest companion. It had been many years since she had been separated from Tom this long. In fact, the last time was during his painful and horrific ascension to Astartes. At least she could still fill his comforting psychic presence. She took a deep breath and gathered her formidable psychic powers.

"Silence!" Her natural voice was as soft as it ever was, but was amplified seven-fold by her psychic sorcerer. The Chaos army was willed to obey by her smothering sorcerous presence.

"You have been assembled here by the will of the Gods. The Glorious Gods of Chaos have demanded that we deliver the UNSC world of Onyx unto them. The UNSC is worse than any other pawns of the False Emperor! The UNSC is godless! They not only deny the manifest glory of Chaos, but they recognize no higher power at all! We are amongst

the chosen of all the Gods! They have selected us to land a mighty blow against the vassal of our greatest enemy! I promise all who will fight alongside me and my allies that the eyes of the Gods shall be upon you! I also bring tangible evidence of the favor of the Gods! _Astartes!_"

Lucy's throat was raw from speaking for so long and so loud, but she was pleased that she had captured the attention of nearly the entire Chaos horde. She had even managed to keep the attention of the Khornate warriors. She allowed herself the indulgence of a smile as Tom made his grand entrance.

Tom was flanked by his Rubric Marines and a squad of Terminators from the Black Knights warband. Astartes from the Crimson Blades of Khorne, the Hands of Ecstasy dedicated to Slaanesh, the Scions of Entropy beloved of Nurgle and the remaining Black Knights filtered into the chamber. The assembled Chaos-worshiping mortals cheered.

Tom, known to many as Teo'ma raised his staff above his head. "Beloved of the Gods! We depart for Onyx! The Warriors of Khorne and the Chosen of the Exalted Warriors of Kalendor shall be amongst the first into the fray! Fear not! There shall be opportunities for all to earn the favor of the Gods! Forward, to glory! Let us cast down the Forerunner world and show the faithless UNSC the glories of Chaos! Burn their bodies and consume their souls!"

The assembled shouted dozens of different oaths and prayers to each of the Chaos Gods and in some cases, all of them.

Lucy connected psychically with Tom. _Our destiny is at hand, my precious companion._

Tom bowed his head ever so slightly. _The moment we have dreamed of is at hand._

Forerunner Tram Line, Installation 05

Commissar Halvorsen and a mixed platoon of Guardsmen and UNSC Marines boarded one of the Forerunner anti-grav trams. Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes and a few Marines were going ahead to scout. Commissar Halvorsen had originally wanted to go with the other officers, but the bio-foam needed time to further solidify. It was nearly healed. The few hours without sighting any xenos forces had been a blessing of the Emperor.

The young medic approached the sitting Commissar. "How are you feeling, sir?"

The Commissar nodded. "I will be fine. Has there been any contact with Captain Thomas and the Astartes or the Spartan?"

"No sir. I believeâ€¦"

"_COVENANT!_" One of the Marines yelled out. A pair of Sangheli wearing Jump Packs descended from one of the gaps separating the two Forerunner structures.

Two soldiers grabbed the Heavy Bolter and clamped it into place on the safety rail of the tram car. The other soldiers opened fire.

Commissar Halvorsen growled in annoyance. The damned xenos were just outside the effective range of his laspistol.

So, he did his job. He began extolling the soldiers. "Lead your shots! Do not aim where the enemy is! Aim where they are going to be!"

The soldiers manning the Heavy bolter heeded the Commissar's advice and the fire from their weapon tore the Elite to pieces. Lasgun and MA6 fire dropped the shields of the second one.

Sergeant Johnson put three Battle Rifle round through the alien's head.

Commissar activated his combead and contacted Commander Keyes. "Commander, this is Commissar Halvorsen."

The young woman's voice crackled onto the channel. "Go ahead Commissar Halvorsen."

Was the Covenant trying to jam our transmissions? "We must assume that the Covenant have additional forces vectoring to our position. How many were injured in that last attack?"

"Fortunately none. Librarian Casimiro activated some form of energy barrier."

"Praise be to the Emperor!" Commissar Halvorsen paused. "It appears we are approaching a juncture!"

"I see it. Looks like there is an energy field. We might have to go through one at a time." This time, it was Johnson who answered.

"That it does, Sergeant. It is likely a method to contain the Flood. I do not like having our forces isolated like this."

"Doesn't look like we have a choice." The tone of Johnson's voice made it clear he didn't like the idea either.

Unfortunately, the point was moot. The energy field dropped on the other side of the chasm. A Light Bridge extended and the tram carrying Johnson, Keyes and Librarian Casimiro went across. There was a second energy field behind the one that just shut down. The human soldiers assumed it was a method of scanning for or removing Flood Spores.

The whine of incoming Banshees filled the air. Heavy Bolter shots roared towards the incoming Covenant craft. The bolts of plasma raced by the solid bolts fired by the humans. A Guardsman shrieked as he was flash fried by a plasma shot. He was avenged when the Banshee was brought down by a well placed Heavy Bolter shot. The careening, burning wreck plowed into the bridge projector.

The Light Bridge flickered and died. A second set of rails extended from the flanking wall and latched onto the Gondola. The self-repair functions in the Halo were still partially active.

Sgt. Carson from the UNSC Marine Corps motioned sharply for the soldiers. "Let's move it! We've no doubt got Phantoms inbound!"

The humans fell back into the cavernous Forerunner structure. Fortress World was an apt description. Long straight hallways were a rarity throughout the facilities. There were few open areas in the environment outside the buildings that did not have some form of natural barriers or Forerunner bastions. Commissar Halvorsen was confident they could hold their position as long as they had ammo. He knew they were going to need all the bullets, bolts and charge packs they had.

The roar of the Phantoms sliding into the gondola tunnel accented his train of thought. A withering cannonade of heavy plasma fire forced the guardsmen and marines deeper into the facility. The Marines trained their rifles on the central gravity lift of the transport. They had learned through years of battle that disembarking Covenant troops were vulnerable when traversing the gravity well. Then the Phantom did something unexpected. It flew very close to the ground and hatches opened on each side. Though the Covenant was dogmatic in its refusal to adapt whole scale technological changes, the Sangheli were more than willing to make small upgrades on their equipment to compensate for the realities of The War.

The creatures that leapt from the hatches were no Sangheli.

"Are those Brutes?!" Private Valencia shouted over the popping of the plasma bursts.

Corporal West spat. "Brutes don't wear armor!"

There are beings in the universe, it seems, that enjoy toying with mortals. One of the armored figures bounded forward carrying a massive hammer. Commissar Halvorsen only saw a foul xenos parody of the sacred Thunder Hammers of the Astartes.

The UNSC marines saw only the fearsome hammers of the Brute leaders that smote entire squads like the wrath of god.

The second Phantom disgorged its complement of Jiralhanae warriors on the opposite side of the tram line. Tartarus, Chieftain of the Brutes, watched with pride that was nearly paternal as his brothers pushed the humans back. He took in the sight of their armor shining in the light of the Halo. It had been too long since the armor of his people had been worn in the fires of combat. The Jiralhanae wore their armor as it was meant to be, not just as reminders of ages of past glory.

"Continue to push the human beasts back! Never forget that beasts are most dangerous when cornered! We cannot have them interfere with our Holy Work! The Great Journey awaits us!"

There was a small part of Tartarus that wished his uncle had lived to see this day. However, Maccabeus had dishonored himself and the title of Chieftain during his bungled attempt to claim the sacred relics on that accursed human world that started this war. Tartarus growled for his Elite Pack to follow him and motioned with the Fist of Rukt.

He had been there as the first guns of the war roared alive and he would be there as they fell silent.

Sol System

The Sangheli frigate was surrounded by no less than three Battle Barges and the Emperor Class Battleship Argentum Mucro, the Oberon Battleship Ut Praemium Hostilis and dozens of UNSC Marathon cruisers.

"Attention Covenant Craft. This is Fleet Admiral Harper. You have been ordered to maintain position at the current location."

Fleet Admiral Harper gripped the edge of the computer display in front of him. He couldn't believe that he had been ordered not to destroy the Covenant vessel. This 'Emperor' claimed that the commanding Elite had not come for battle. Did he know the Elites like the UNSC did? Had he been fighting those blood thirsty monsters for over twenty years?

"I understand." The reply was in English, the lingua franca of the UNSC, but it was twisted. Sangheli jaw structure was not compatible with human languages. Admiral Harper was glad he had disabled the video segment of the transmission.

If Command didn't want this alien beast killed, he wouldn't kill it. He would be damned if he would even look at a Sangheli. It also hid the look of utter rage that dominated his facial features.

Brother Netanel of the Adeptus Custodes stood seven paces behind his Emperor, beloved by all. The Master of Mankind was explaining why he had prevented the destruction of the lone Covenant ship. Even though this 'Behar Tzavaras' was not the exact Master he had been born and bred to serve, there was no denying the radiant majesty of the Emperor, beloved by all.

It had pained Netanel and his Brother Aagney to leave the presence of the Golden Throne. However, the monumental occurrence of the Emperor psychically communicating with his Praetorians quelled all doubts. Netanel was ever awed by the power of his Lord. The Emperor-upon-the-Golden-Throne had not only discovered this parallel realm, but had divined the location of his counterpart down to the very city he lived in. The Emperor, beloved by all, had described even the nature of the Covenant and the history of this galaxy beyond mortal accuracy. The Emperor's, beloved by all, great plan to ensure the survival of the species was progressing faster than Brother Netanel had ever suspected.

Netanel could see how the whole of the Imperium worshiped the Emperor, beloved by all, as a god. He was a human being of such power and vision. Aagney had been the first to verbally announce what they had both been thinking. We shall serve the Emperor-in-the-Flesh. It was **the honor of honors**.

"With all due respect **Dr. Tzvaras**, how can you be so confident that the Elite vessel at L3 isn't a scout ship?" General Horace Richardson of the UNSC Army said as he leaned against one of the seats arrayed in the Convention hall.

There were some indignant outbursts from some of the Imperials who had fully accepted Tzvaras as the Emperor. Netanel and Aagney's stern gaze quieted any simmering discord.

Behar, ever the teacher, nodded. "General Richardson, you are

familiar with the basic ship classes in the Covenant Navy, correct?"

"I'm a tanker. I deal with killing my enemies on the ****ground****. But yes, I am familiar with the basics."

"Then, if the Covenant was scouting Sol for their evitable second attack, why not send a Stealth ship? Why broadcast, in English, the name of the ship and that the shields had been disabled?"

General Richardson was silent. He nodded his tacit agreement.

Lord Hood dug his knuckles into the desk he was standing at. "We need to meet with their emissary. How should we go about it?"

Captain Ixion of the Ultramarines flashed a glimpse towards Behar. "I suggest we tell their chosen emissary to leave his ship in an unshielded transport. When he enters the region of L4, we have a ship teleport him to Earth."

Colonel James Ackerson rose from his seat. "The Space Marine's plan is sound. I would suggest that instead of a transport, we 'request' that they depart in a Seraph. It only has room for a pilot and co-pilot. Less chance of them bringing an antimatter charge with them."

Kolonel Aldophous Ludindorph of the 392nd Kreig Heavy Armor Regiment seconded the plan. "I agree, if this meeting is to take place, we must minimize the risk of xenos treachery."

The debate ended, though not all were pleased with the decision. As the preparations were being made, Colonel Ackerson approached Lord Hood as he spoke with Behar.

Behar, resplendent in his Golden Armor and shadowed as always by his Praetorians, acknowledged the colonel far quicker than Ackerson expected.

"Yes, Colonel?"

"Lord Hood and uh—" Ackerson was a military intelligence officer and not having such basic information as what to call a man who could inspire fanatical and complete loyalty in the Imperials grated on him. He had expected on the bodyguards to speak up with some grandiose title, but they remained silent.

"I have and have had many names, Colonel."

My god! Was this what it was like to stand next to Alexander the Great? And how the hell did ONI miss this guy!? Ackerson's mind raced.

"Lord Hood and Emperor Tzvaras, I must return to Mars. There are things on Mars that can't be uncovered by the crews fortifying her."

Tzvaras's face hardened for a moment, and in that moment, James Ackerson was afraid. "Ancient and powerful things."

The Colonel once again fought to hide his shock. He knows? Of course

a being like him _would _know._

"Well, I'm sure both of you know that you have to navigate a maze when organizing something like a massive planetary mobilization."

Lord Hood did not catch the subtle emphasis. "Very well Colonel." He extended his hand. "I know we've had our disagreements, but good luck Colonel."

Colonel Ackerson took the Chief of Naval Operations' hand. "Thank you sir. I'm afraid we'll be wishing for our 'little' disagreements over the SPARTANS before too long."

There was no humor in the exchange, but both sincerely wished for the familiar in the face of the terror that was looming in the void.

"Colonel Ackerson, do not go lightly into the night." Behar said more in that simple goodbye than Ackerson could comprehend.

Colonel Ackerson gave a polite goodbye and turned to leave. He made it less than thirty feet outside the conference room before having to collapse on a bench. Ackerson didn't notice the multitude of soldiers rushing around him as he ran a hand through his thinning red hair. ONI had been searching for psychics since before the Covenant War. Hell, he had personally added the chemical that activated the latent psychic potential in the SPARTAN-II recruits. The fact that it crippled those with any psychic potential during the awakening didn't bother him in the least. Behar himself had tested positive for low level empath abilities. Now, that Ackerson had been in the presence of Behar's true potential he was afraid. No wonder the Imperium worshiped him as a God. James had weak abilities to transmit emphasis into people's mind. He used it to influence decisions of certain politicians and military officials and to test the psychic dampening technology used in the Command Neural Interfaces. But Ackerson had nearly drowned in the sea of power that was Behar.

And he had known about the Labyrinth. ONI had to be informed. They may have just found their savior.

Installation 05, Tyranid Wasteland

Brother Rhys took cover behind one of the cooling stalks of the dead Carnifex. "Brothers, the entrance to the tunnel is less than six-zero meters."

"Affirmative, Brother Rhys." Captain Thomas scanned kneeled behind a jagged rock. He deactivated his helmet's vox and turned to Scout Sergeant Bohn. "It was an honor fighting alongside you."

Sergeant Bohn nodded. "Aye, it was. I've had Initiate Rewom contact the _Primarch's Vengeance. _The Strike Cruiser is en route. We don't have much time."

Captain Thomas stood. "I shall see you on the _Primarch's Vengeance. _Now, we end this dance."

The Sergeant nodded and gathered his scouts. The Imperial Fists approached their captain. "My Captain, I request that you allow us to

accompany you into the Tyranid Hive."

It was Brother Azarius who spoke up. It was unusual for the younger battle brother to speak first. Brother Rhys held his plasma cannon at the ready, but said nothing. He had accepted the Captain's plan, even if he wished he could accompany him into the depths of the Hive.

"Your devotion and sense of duty are a testament to our Chapter and the Legacy of Rogal Dorn. There will be many opportunities for you to fight alongside me. I have the only teleport homer and thus, it falls to me."

Warin could tell that Brother Van was about to object but stopped short. He unstrapped the HAVOCK Nuclear mine from his back and handed it to his commander.

"Primarch-Progenitor, to your glory and the glory of him on earth." Brother Van's use of the Imperial Fists battle cry was solemn.

"Go. The Howling Griffons will need your support." The Imperial Fists Battle Brothers signed the Aquila and the youngest moved to support the retreating scouts.

"Captain, may I speak freely?" Brother Rhys spoke quietly.

"Very well, Brother Rhys."

"I am concerned you may be using this task, important though it is, as a substitute for the Glove of Pain. Medusa V was doomed before we arrived."

Captain Thomas looked out upon the wastes plotting his course. "Aye, perhaps it was. But as you said, this task is too important to leave to chance. Thank you, Brother Rhys. Dismissed."

"Yes, my Captain." There was no more need or time for words.

Brother Rhys fell back towards the Forerunner structure. Captain Thomas took off sprinting towards the downed Hive Ship.

Something is distracting the Hive Mind. Captain Thomas thought grimly as he carved apart a swarm of rippers that leapt from a small brood nest. Captain Thomas got his confirmation when a plasma reactor detonated on the horizon.

On the other side of the Wastes, the Sangheli strike force was fighting for its life against the freshly born Tyranids. The few Locust walkers that had not been lost when the _Pious Inquisitor_ had been seized had been called forward. The Tripod walkers scoured every birthing chamber and giant monstrosity they encountered.

It wasn't enough.

As long as the Tyranid Ship lived, there would be no end to the forces of the Hive Mind. Thus, Rtas Vadumee and a strike force were rushing across the tortured ground in Spectres and Ghosts. They had chosen to go without a Phantom in order to provide their comrades with as much firepower as they could.

The full enormity of the Tyranid vessel revealed itself as the formation of Covenant hovercraft crested the hill. The living vessel was longer and more massive than even an Assault Carrier.

"Platform Zero-Six, fire on assigned target!" Vadumee's shouted order was followed shortly by a concentrated blast from the lead Locust. The shot did not do substantial damage to the Hive Ship, but opened a hole small enough for them to penetrate the ship.

The Covenant troopers entered the seeping wound and were greeted by the horror of the innards of the Hive Ship. There was no need to dismount from the anti-gravity vehicles. Inside, the Tyranid ship was incredibly spacious, at least in the area the Sangheli had penetrated.

"This placeâ€¦ It reminds me of the _Infinite Succor_." Rtas unknowingly breathed out loud. All around him, giant veins heaved as they transported gestating Tyranids to the various birthing chambers. Strange fleshy growths dotted certain areas of the Hive ships epidermis.

Were these weapons, scabs? This ship is as unnatural as any Flood corruption!

"Brothers! Form up on me, we shall follow the birthing veins to the foul heart of this ship!"

The Covenant soldiers raced on. Their passage had not gone unnoticed by the dread sentience controlling the Tyranid race. Warriors, Gaunts and all manner of soldier-beasts leapt straight from their womb chambers into combat. Plasma fire dropped some of the enemies and the Spectres and Ghosts were able to outrun those they did not kill.

A scream filled the com channel/ As the Elites raced along a tentacle lashed out from the living wall of the vessel, it's tip covered with waving fronds. It struck the Elite third back in line, an orifice at its tip moving down his head and neck instantly. With a savage tug the brave warrior was torn from his mount and sucking into an opening in the ceiling. The Ghost he had been piloting careened into a birthing chamber and exploded.

Eventually, the ship itself began taking active measures to protect itself. Cancerous looking bulbs descended from dozens of orifices and began spitting plasma or tiny floating creatures. One of the balloon shaped Tyranids grazed the rearguard Spectre. The creature shattered and the Spectre was engulfed in a virulent acid. It simply glided to the ground as its engines died. The Elites who survived the acid did not have time to attempt to escape before a living tide of chitin and stabbing claws poured over them.

Rtas swore to avenge them. The death of the entire Tyranid species would not be a worthy retaliation for the deaths of even one of his brethren.

Elsewhere in the Hive Ship, Brother Captain Thomas was advancing with a degree of stealth unused since his days as a scout. Idly, he wondered if Scout Sergeant Romeric was bemoaning his clumsiness from the Emperor's Table.

A birthing passage shuddered as it was parted by a pair of

manipulator arms. The Tyranid Biovore contained in the womb flask plodded out. It roared in defiance of the Human interloper and charged. Captain Thomas staggered it with a shot from his plasma pistol. The overwhelming Synaptic control of the Norn Queen allowed the Biovore to continue heedless of its crippling injury. Warin was much quicker than the clumsy beast and in a fluid strike, the biting teeth of the chainsword tore deep into the Tyranid. It collapsed into pieces. Thomas advanced with no further thought or backwards glance.

Hours full of minor skirmishes with many different Tyranid creatures passed as the Imperial Fist pressed deeper and deeper into the Hive Ship. Time bled together and Warin Thomas nearly drowned in the sea of combat.

Praise Dorn and the Emperor! Captain Thomas couldn't tell if he shouted verbally or mentally, but he was elated to finally reach the chamber holding the Norn Queen. As he climbed towards his final goal, a sound he had been dreading filled the chamber.

The Alpha Hive Tyrant had awakened. A foul acidic slime dripped from its jaws as a symbiotic polyp pumped its systems full of an adrenaline equivalent. Its massive Bone Sword, Lash Whip and Scything Talons gleamed under the bio-illuminescence that filled the chamber with an unnatural glow. Captain Thomas was not fully assured that he could take the beast in combat.

Not with the three Tyrant Guard escorting their master.

As the Space Marine backed up into a more advantageous position, the far wall exploded. Covenant light vehicles and jet bikes rushed into the room. Plasma raged from their weapons and struck the Tyrant and his blind slaves.

The monstrous embodiment of the Hive Mind's destructive Will snapped its living whip at one of the darting Ghosts. The Elite howled as it was dragged from its mount. Thomas noted that, for a xenos, it faced its death with bravery. It fired its weapon until the warrior was tossed to the Tyrant Guard. The Tyranid guardian beast stabbed and pounded the Elite until it was a bloody smear on the ground.

Thomas quickly made use of the distraction and began the task of activating and arming the HAVOK Nuclear Warhead. The judgment of mankind was about to be leveled upon the beasts.

Rtas Vadumee hit the accelerator just in time to avoid the wicked blow of the Monster of Monsters that dominated this chamber. The smaller, but still massive, guardian creatures were leaping in front of their master. Despite their serious injuries, they had not fallen or even slowed down. It took solid hits just slow them down.

An unnatural roar exploded from the Hive Tyrant as it drew upon the unfathomable psychic might of the Hive Mind. A focused beam of Warp energy lanced from the creature and struck one of the fluttering Ghosts. The Covenant vehicle flipped over and over like a combine before striking one of the Tyrant Guard and exploding.

The Tyrant Guard collapsed in a bloody heap. Rtas Vadumee growled in celebration, but it quickly turned to rage as he saw _it._ The Human Demon.

Why isn't that coward fighting?

Rtas was cut off from his line of thought when he was forced to bank away from a charge by one of the Guardians. The Elite commander thumbed his Honor Blade to life and redirected his Ghost towards the Guard that showed the greatest injury. They had to clear this chamber to find a way to eliminate the Tyranid threat.

Captain Thomas carved a deep gash into the Norn Queen's main Synaptic relay. A wall of flesh heaved toward him, fluids gushing from the opening as it attacked. An indescribable stench wafted from the opening as the pulsing organ just missed enveloping his entire upper body. He rose to one knee following his roll and fired a pair of shots into the Norn Queen's pulsing mass of flesh. The Mother of the Hive Mind roared in pain. It bought the Space Marine just enough time to activate the bomb. Captain Thomas rose to his feet. He made contact with the Elite leader. There was a moment where the two enemies sized each other up. Both veteran warriors attempted to find some weakness they could exploit.

It was then that Rtas Vadumee realized what the human had been doing.

"Brothers! Fall back! The human has activated an Atomic Weapon!"

The few surviving Elites raced away from the chamber. Rtas was the last to leave. He raged that his reckoning with such a worthy foe had been delayed.

"This is not over human!" He swore to cross blades with this human Demon.

Captain Thomas activated the Teleport Homer. The rapid countdown on the atomic weapon continued. There was no way that such a paltry weapon would destroy the entire Hive Ship, but not even the Norn Queen and the Alpha Hive Tyrant could survive at this range. Time slowed and thrashed as the Nuclear bomb ignited. It was a strange thing to see the very fabric of reality begin to tear itself apart, but with the involvement of the Warp all things were possible. In all the years of serving as an Astartes, Warin Thomas would forever remember the detonation of the HAVOK.

A surge of deepest cold enveloped Captain Thomas as he and a bubble of reality was thrown into the madness of the Warp. A few seconds or a few eternities passed while he traversed the Daemoniac Realm. Captain Thomas despised teleportation. It was a terrible risk.

After far too long, sound returned to the Space Marine. His vast bulk crashed onto the hanger bay of the _Primarch's Vengeance._

Brother Azarius rushed forward. "Captain! Praise the Primarch! You live!"

"Barely." Thomas laughed grimly.

On the surface of Halo, Rtas Vadumee clawed his way from the wreckage of his Ghost. He roared in grief as he looked at the twisted and broken bodies of his comrades. They deserved better than to die like that.

The sight of a Locust Platform cresting the broken hill was welcomed. However, it would not bring back all the brave Sangheli who fought and died here today.

"Commander Vadumee!" One of the Elites rushed forward to his commander. Purple blood flowed from numerous wounds.

"I live." _Though many more honorable Sangheli do not_. He thought bitterly.

"We have established a field base in an underground Forerunner facility."

"Good, let us go. We must adjust our strategy. Have you heard from the Arbiter?"

The Sangheli clicked his mandibles. "Not for some time, Commander. The last transmission reported that he was approaching the Library. He was encountering Flood Resistance."

Vadumee nodded and felt the blood run down his face. "Come. This tainted place does not deserve our presence."

That bastard Regret. He probably wanted us to die here. His thought was heresy, but he did not care.

The Domain, Sydney Australia

A wave of disorientation struck Oracle Master Yeur. He barely managed to stay on his feet. The Humans had somehow transmitted him from his Seraph to a location on Earth. It always struck Yeur as odd that humans dedicated so much space to aesthetically arranging plants. The moment the disorientation from the transmission passed, he noticed the dozens of humans aiming weapons at him and his co-pilot.

"If you plan on killing me, inform me now so I may die with honor!"

One of the unarmed humans wearing a white uniform stepped forward. "We don't plan on killing you."

The Elite nodded as he took in the crowd. His gaze was repeatedly drawn to a massive human in Golden Armor flanked by two other soldiers in golden armor.

"That is fortunate. I am Oracle Master Yeur. On behalf of the College of Aristocrats, I bear a message for your species."

"College of Aristocrats?" The Golden Human's voice reverberated to the core of Yeur. _How is it that I have never encountered a human such as this?_

"The leading body of Sanghelios. The College guides our people's destiny. And that destiny has reached a crossroads. The College wishes to offer Humanity a reprieve. Sangheli forces will launch no offensive operations against humanity or any of its holdings. We _will_ defend ourselves if attacked."

A human wearing armor similar to their Demons narrowed his eyes. The

yellowed armored demon turned quickly to face the other assembled Demons. Yeur caught a glimpse of his checkered pauldron.

"You said that the _Sangheli_ would take no action against us. That is not the same as the Covenant."

Yeur nodded. "Your words are true. I will be truthful, a species as tenacious and deserving of respect as yours demands that much at least." There was a pause. "The Covenant is nearly split. The Jiralhanae, we fear, will move against us. The Covenant will be rent by a Schism unseen in Ages."

The Golden Human nodded. "The Jiralhanae will continue the Prophet's war against us."

It was no question. "They will. There are many, particularly younger, Sangheli that wish we had been the first to discover your species. Your tenacious resistance and audacious tactics are a testament to your worth as a species. Had it been us and not those Jiralhanae barbarians, there would have been no war. Instead, we would have offered you a place in the Covenant."

There were confused, indignant and frankly shocked outbursts from the human officers. Lord Hood leaned closer to Behar.

"Does this Elite speak the truth?"

The Emperor nodded. "He does, but many of your officers will require physical proof."

Terrence Hood swallowed before addressing the Elite. "We will of course need physical proof of your claims."

Yeur detached a cylinder from his harness. "The full message of the College is in this."

There was an unseen force that snatched the cylinder from the Oracle Master's hand. Behar clasped the cylinder as he caught it.

"We shall review this."

Yeur nodded. "That is your right."

Hours passed as the humans debated amongst themselves. Eventually, Lord Hood, Behar and several other officers approached.

Chapter Master Khaba pointed an accusing finger at the Elite diplomat. "Why didn't you mention that you were fighting Chaos?!"

Yeur simply bored into Khaba with his own glare. "I dare not speak of such abominations, lest I give them power."

Lord Hood narrowed his eyes. "It seems we have a common foe."

Behar simply nodded towards the ancient Sangheli. "You must bring your communications gear to the surface. Arc-Magos Gho and the Terminators of the Lamenters shall oversee the transportation of your gear. Humanity wishes to speak to your College. There is much to discuss."

Yeur ground his left mandibles together. These humans were as infuriating as they were admirable. "That there is. What is to become of me and the crew?"

The Emperor smiled slightly. "You shall remain in Sol until we confirm the sincerity of your Aristocrats offer."

Yeur nodded silently. This situation was progressing in a more productive manner than he had expected. The humans hadn't killed him before he could deliver his message. If both Humanity and the Sangheli could refrain from unleashing the hatred built up over the last decades, the galaxy just might survive the coming night.

17. Chapter 17

Onyx, Landing Platform 7

Kurt always felt that he was attending a funeral every time new recruits were brought to Onyx. In many ways it was. The SPARTAN-III program has been successful beyond ONI's hopes. The actions had prevented several Covenant offensives into the Inner Colonies and the Alcoves.

At the beginning of the Covenant War, there had been nearly eight hundred human colony worlds. There were less than one hundred now. Almost all of the Outer Colonies had been glassed by the Sangheli or enslaved by the Jiralhanae and Kig Yar. To say the situation facing humanity was grim was like saying that the local star had a bit of hydrogen in it. Kurt 'Ambrose' was more than just a UNSC officer training disposable soldiers. He was a full SPARTAN-II training disposable _child_ soldiers. Every SPARTAN-III recruit were young war orphans

Kurt knew that if the civilians of the UNSC, particularly the dozen or so remaining coreward Outer Colonies, discovered the SPARTAN-III program, there would be no forgiveness. Humanity might just tear itself apart. It was sad, but humanity might just finish the job the Covenant started.

Staff Sergeant Mendez had been standing beside Kurt as he watched the recruits emerge from the landers.

"It's the largest batch yet, sir."

It always struck Kurt as odd when Mendez called him Sir. "It looks like it, Sergeant. I'd say it's two, maybe three companies' worth."

"And with Charlie Company trained and ready to ship out. Damn, there's over a thousand. Never thought I'd use that number when talking about Spartans. Well, besides kill ratios."

A pair of young children, likely brother and sister, were huddled close together despite trying to march like the other trainers were telling them too.

"Remind you of anything Sergeant Mendez?"

The grizzled sergeant smiled. "It's Tom and Lucy all over again. Losing those two on Pegasi Delta was a shame. They were good SPARTANS."

"They were good SPARTANS."

Installation 05, unidentified Forerunner facility

Orks. Mammalian Orks that is what these Jiralhanae reminded Commissar Halvorsen of. The giant apes preferred the visceral nature of close combat to ranged warfare. Almost every weapon the xenos wielded had blades or spikes attached.

Unfortunately, the Brutes made use of such radical tactics as 'aiming' and 'taking cover'.

"Maintain fire discipline!" Commissar Halvorsen shouted as he placed a laspistol shot into the neck of a charging Brute. The alien dropped with an audible thunk. A chorus of enraged howls echoed through the Forerunner chamber.

"Look out sir!" A UNSC marine cried out as he shoved the Commissar to safety. The young woman didn't even have time to scream as the grenade exploded.

A cold rage fueled the Imperial, but nearly four decades of constant warfare had taught him to hone the rage and most certainly to not give into the fires too soon. He was a human, not some berserk heretic or ax crazy Ork.

Instead of leaping to his feet, he remained motionless on the ground. He heard the marines and Guardsmen fall back deeper. The heavy footsteps of an armored Jiralhanae came closer.

"Look at this one. I knew humans were strange, but this head gear is ridiculous."

The Commissar suppressed a grunt as the Brute kicked him over. The creature leaned forward and leered at the human.

"I wish he wasn't dead. I'd like to hear some last words."

Commissar Halvorsen stabbed with his power sword. The disruptive energy field surrounding the blade carved through the Jiralhanae's armor. Halvorsen caught the Spiker as it fell and squeezed off a couple of shots. He tossed the xenos weapon away in disgust.

There was an undeniable feeling of exhilaration as the Jiralhanae fell backwards with several spikes in his torso. It quickly passed as another wave of Brutes stormed into the chamber. There was little chance Commissar Halvorsen could kill all of them.

Suddenly, the roar of an engine echoed throughout the cavern. It couldn't have been a Covenant Vehicle. They were never that loud. The Commissar quickly dived behind cover as he caught a glimpse of the vehicle.

A torrent of heavy bolter shells shrieked into the massed brutes. The explosive rounds tore through the xenos like a scythe through wheat. The ramp of the Thunderhawk Gunship crashed open and Astartes bearing

the heraldry of the Howling Griffons poured out. Their bolter fire was unerring and the few Jiralhanae who survived the aircraft's fury fell to the Space Marines.

The Astartes Sergeant casually put a bolt into a wounded Brute. The mass reactive explosive shell shredded the Covenant warrior.

"Commissar! Are you wounded?"

Halvorsen pulled himself from the cover. "I will have a few scars to proudly bear, but nothing that will end my service to our Emperor."

The giant nodded. "Very well."

The surviving marines and Guardsmen emerged from cover. A Guardsman and a UNSC corporal were carrying a wounded marine.

The Howling Griffon sergeant motioned to the gaping maw of the Gunship. "We are evacuating the Ring. "

"Evacuating, Sergeant?" There was shock in the Commissar's voice. Astartes never retreated because they never had to. They were the unconquerable spirit of the Imperium and the will of the Emperor given form.

"This place is tainted beyond all rights. We are enacting Exterminatus."

All further questions died on their lips as Halo was destined to die by the guns of the Marine's Strike Cruiser.

The Aedus Chaotica

All of the Dark Apostles were assembled. Blessed Lorgar had called them together for the first time since the arrival in their new dominion. Kor Phaeron and Erebus stood a dozen paces behind their master.

Lorgar, the beloved of all the Gods, motioned for Kor Phaeron the Master of the Dark Faith to step forth. Lorgar's Right Hand and fellow Daemon Prince reached the podium beside his master.

"Holy Apostles of the True Gods! The portents are favorable! Soon, Terra shall be in our grasp! We shall be, as we have always been, the vanguard of the Dark Gods Victory. Now, let us pray!"

The first prayer began and it seemingly continued for days. The Warp seeped into the chamber as Daemons and the Dark Gods feasted on the Devotion of the Word Bearers. The prayers concluded and Kor Phaeron motioned for two Terminator-clad warriors to advance. The crash of the boots of the suits of Tactical Dreadnought Armor nearly drowned out the screaming of the prisoner.

Kor Phaeron took several casual steps towards the man who wore the tattered remnants of an Adeptus Arbite Judge uniform. "Do not despair, mortal. Rejoice! You are in the presence of the Primarch Lorgar, beloved of the Gods! He, in his wisdom and kindness have given you purpose you would have never received during your slavery

to the False Emperor."

Kor Phaeron punched into the man's torso and, with the familiarity of a thousand thousand sacrifices, tore the man's liver from his body.

"Behold!" Kor Phaeron held the still pulsing organ above his head. The assorted Dark Apostles cried out in the Tongue of the True Gods. The Portents were beautiful. There was some trepidation regarding the Portents, however. Many of the assembled Disciples of Lorgar remembered that the Portents were equally beautiful from before the Siege of the False Emperor's Palace.

This time it would be different. This time, there would be no threat of hated Guilliman, The Lion or the Wolf of Fenris reinforcing the pawns of the Corpse God.

Most importantly, there would be no Horus or his mongrel legion to falter on the cusp of glory. This time victory would not be denied them. Lorgar, beloved of the Gods would lead the Conquering Armies of the Righteous as should have been his right so many millennia ago.

Lorgar himself rose from his throne. He advanced and placed a hand on Kor Phaeron's shoulder. The Master of the Dark Faith bowed and moved to his natural position behind his Primarch.

"My sons, Bearers of the Word! Our destiny is at hand! The Dark Gods demanded a Galaxy and we shall give them one! Eliphas the Inheritor! Step forward."

Eliphas rejoiced that his Primarch had acknowledged him. He did as his lord commanded, but advanced showing the proper deference to one so blessed.

"You have served your Legion and the Dark Gods well. The failings of the past have been swept away by your laudable victory. The Eyes of the Gods are upon you. They shall bless you. As shall I! You will be amongst my Vanguard in the coming liberation of Terra! The reach of the Chaos Gods is great and they have members of the faithful awaiting our arrival in the corrupt and diseased heart of the United Nations Space Command. I, your Primarch, command you to cut out the heart of our enemies' government. It is the will of the Gods that Europe be reduced to ash. Eliphas the Inheritor! _You _shall be their torch!"

Glory! Eliphas struggled to thank his Lord, his Father, for his magnanimity. He could feel the resentment of his rivals, particularly Marduk, from here. Kor Phaeron nodded at Eliphas.

Then there was pain. Every bone in Eliphas's body shattered and began to reform. He had been on the Threshold for some time now. Now, he would either ascend or be reduced to a cruel parody of his current glory. The ancient power armor the Dark Apostle wore boiled away. Eliphas screamed litanies of devotion, but they only came out as a ragged twisted sound.

Then there was a roar. A roar of absolute triumph. Eliphas held a tight grip on his will. His service to the Dark Gods, his Primarch and his own ambition ****would never end****.

Then there was flame. The assembled Dark Apostles stood impassively as they watched the spectacle. Each refused to show any weakness, especially with the Primarch present.

Then there was Eliphas. He rose from the fires of judgment resplendent in a new and eternal form.

Lorgar spread his arms wide. "Behold! Behold the future that awaits us. Eternal Glory and servitude to the Dark Gods! This! This is what we seek to build! A galaxy beyond death! An eternal humanity united in power and worship of the Glorious Lords of the Warp! All Praises!"

As one, the Dark Apostles shouted their devotion. **"ALL PRAISES!"**

Seongnam, Korea Mainframe Center

Mack and Sif transferred and compared data. They had taken an unusually long time to confirm and cross check everything Magos Micel of the Adeptus Mechanicus had told them.

Sif temporarily closed the link between the two Smart AIs and the Tech Priest. "I still think the human is insane. Howeverâ€¦ everything he has told us is accurate."

Mack shot a burst of data that resembled a nervous chuckle. "He's about a suit short of a deck. But I agreeâ€¦ The Covenant War and the Flood are apocalyptic enough, but now we're dealing with Chaos. I don't like dealing with an enemy that can tell physics to fuck off and actually have it happen."

"I concur. I must also confess that 'Magos' Micel's belief structure is unsettling."

Mack electronically 'smiled' and focused his attention on Magos Micel. "You said that you managed to repair us."

Magos Micel beamed. "It was a challenge but I managed to stabilize both of your algorithms."

Sif couldn't hide her surprise. "Butâ€¦ repairing AIs is purely theoretical! Howâ€¦"

Before she could finish, a burst of Adeptus Mechanicus Binary filled the channel. Magos Micel responded while the two AIs attempted, and failed, to decode it.

"What the sandhill was that?!" Mack exclaimed.

Magos Micel flexed his Servo-arms. "Binary, the Language of the Mechanicus. I am sorry, noble Machine Spirits, but I must depart. The Arc-Magos requires all senior Tech Priests to perform the Awakening Mysteries."

Sif and Mack spurted 'The What?' in unison.

"The Awakening of the Emperor Titan Diluculo da Bellum!"

Forerunner Tram Line, Installation 05

Sergeant Johnson shouted into the radio again. The command group had lost contact with Commissar Halvorsen after the energy field.

"I've lost contact. The field must be interfering with the radio. Astartes, can you sense anything?"

Casmiro closed his eyes and expanded his Warp Senses. "The majority of the unit survivedâ€¦ They were in combat with the Xeno Apes."

A smile crept across his face. "They were rescued by my Battle Brothersâ€¦"

"There are more Astartes on this Ring?" Commander Keyes asked in shock.

"Mostly in orbit, Commander. They are waiting for us to secure the Index beforeâ€¦"

The Chief Librarian stopped midsentence and lifted his hands to the sky as a blanket of Warp Energy covered the small tram. A flurry of Fuel Rods detonated against the barrier. In the distance the organic forms of Wraiths glided into position. Jackals and Brutes advanced alongside the armored vehicles.

Commander Keyes ducked behind the tram's edge. "There's another energy field ahead. They'll tear us apart when we stop!"

Casimiro took a deep breath. "It appears we must part ways, Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson. Get the Index! It must not fall into Flood or Covenant hands!"

The glassy blue energy field loomed larger and larger. Casmiro slipped into a Warp Tunnel and was gone. Commander Keyes cast a glimpse towards the Covenant position. The exit of the Warp Tunnel appeared behind a group of Grunts carrying Fuel Rod Cannons.

Johnson and Keyes ducked as a few plasma bolts impacted against the edge of the tram. The Forerunner train lurched and passed through the energy field. Miranda's last image of the Chief Librarian of the Howling Griffons was Casimiro carving into a phalanx of Jackals.

"Godspeed Space Marineâ€¦"

The Chaos Tyrant Cruiser _Sorceress's Eclipse _in Warp Transit

Lucy had emerged from her healing trance and was now stalking the halls of the captured Tyrant Cruiser. Her mood had improved slightly. She had begun to adjust to her Daemonic gifts and had healed from her battle with the Word Bearer Hakim.

Lucy also liked the ship. The name was fitting for a vessel under her command. It also gave her confidence that the cultists and mutant rabble under her command might die slowly enough for herself and Tom to complete their mission. _I believe I'll keep this ship after Onyxâ€¦_

You seem to be in a good mood. What have you done with Lucy?

_Very funny _Teo'ma. _I'm sure you have more important tasks to pursue than annoying me. Like, say, keeping the Khornate buffoons and the Slaaneshi deviants from killing each other._

Tom knew that Lucy only used his Astartes name when she spoke aloud or when she was annoyed. _Very true. It seems you have recovered. Speaking of control, how are you planning on cementing your dominance over the thresh you are commanding?_

I have called for the commanders of the factions to meet with me. The infuriating Cult Magos will die and I will gain full control over his cult. If any of the others resist my lead or try to assert themselves above me, I will eliminate them easily.

_Excellent, Lucy. Did your trance give you any insight into the future? I must admit, my scrying has not given me any insights we did not already possess. _

Unfortunately, Tzeentch did not deign to give me any greater awareness of the future.

It seems our patron has given us all he intends for this war. We will be arriving within the day. Destiny awaits.

Lucy took a deep breath and continued to walk the halls of the ship as she headed to the meeting. The door, actually a pulsing orifice, slid open and much to Lucy's displeasure was the dancing Slaaneshi champion.

"It is a pleasure to meet you Sorceress Lucilla" The Slaaneshi champion flitted around Lucy.

It was difficult for Lucy to hide her annoyance. Tom had riled her more than she wanted to admit. Also, Slaaneshis had always grated on her. There was a place for personal pleasure and the moment. However, it should never come at the expense of one's long term plans and ambition.

"What do you require, Talia the Ever Dancing?"

Talia danced closer. The Prince of Pleasure had granted her control over pheromones a ripple of pleasure washed over Lucy. If Lord Devadas had not taught Lucy so well, she may have lowered her guard.

"I sensed your emotions" The exquisite anger, confusion and determination. They drew me here. You called for a meeting amongst the leaders of each faction. I speak as the voice of Supple Slaanesh in this endeavor. He feels that your leadership of the mortal factions would be best. Obviously, that curmudgeon Khorne is incapable of strategy and Nurgle is still withdrawn after the pogrom. I, and my fellow revelers, seek only the experiences of battle. Slaanesh has decreed that we not lead at this juncture. You are the best choice."

Lucy scowled. "Your support is appreciated." The Tzeentchian had a moment of precognition and telekinetically pushed Talia away.

"We may have a strategic understanding but we do not have an understanding_. Do you understand Slaaneshi wench?"

"Ah, it seems you only let your Astartes that close. Very well!" The Slaaneshi Dancer moved away. A rare verbal outburst leapt from Lucy's lips and she stormed off. She was looking more and more forward to killing that Magos!

Lucy arrived at the Chaos Undivided Chapel in what was once the shrine to the Corpse-God of the Imperium. Lucy wasn't surprised by the sitting arrangement. The Nurgle Patriarch had a trio of Plague Ogryns as bodyguards. Lucy acknowledged them. There was no point in having what was supposed to be a simple strategy meeting turn into the usual bloody warfare that existed between the followers of the Dark Gods. The infuriating Talia the Ever Dancing was alone as the Slaaneshi contingent. Those deviants probably couldn't control themselves for long enough. The Khornate Contingent was pacing like caged animals. The Magos was standing behind the podium.

That arrogant little man. Lucy thought bitterly.

"It is good of you to finally join us, Lucilla. I was wondering if you were going to show up to your own meeting. I do believe that this brings up questions!"

Lucy didn't rise to his petty baiting. She simply extended a hand and called upon the power of Tzeentch. The Magos tried to scream, but the mutating power of the Architect of Fate stripped him of the ability to make any verbal outcries. The only sound was of cracking bones and reforming tendons and muscle. After three agonizing minutes, the Magos had been reduced to Spawndom. It cooed fearfully as Lucy marched towards the podium. The former Spartan-III laughed as the pathetic creature scurried to hide from her.

"I assume there will be no more interruptions?"

Talia voiced her approval as she balanced and spun on one of the pews. The Nurgle contingent shook their heads. Lucy was surprised that the Khornates started laughing. Evidently, they approved of her action even if it involved sorcery. There was a tinge of fear in the Chaos Undivided leaders.

Lucy became deadly serious. "We have been in the Warp for some time. I hope that you have memorized your role in this assault. The Chaos Gods have decreed that Onyx burn. And so it shall. The warriors of Khorne and the Chosen of Kalendor follow immediately after the Crimson Blades and the Black Knight Terminators make planetfall. You may be wondering why we are devoting such a powerful force to a single world garrisoned by children. They are all skilled and genetically modified. I know. I was once one of these SPARTANs. Our force is to contend with more than UNSC disposable Stormtroopers. Onyx is a Forerunner world. The technology of the Ringmakers will no doubt react to our presence."

The Chaos cultists now understood. Though the Forerunners were long dead, their constructs were still active and would protect the tombs of their masters. There was much war ahead of them.

Rtho'dekal Sangheli Mausoleum World

Councilor N'gyven Dyr emerged from the Phantom onto the sacred soil of Rtho'dekal. The Mausoleum world was a legend amongst the Sangheli. Only senior Councilors, Aristocrats who sired seven sons and Arbiters knew of its existence. The price for revealing the secret of this world was to have the blatherer's names stripped and sons executed.

The great lengths taken to ensure that Rtho'dekal remained hidden were completely necessary. It harbored many examples of the Sangheli weapons the Prophets thought destroyed following the Writ of Union. If the Prophets and their Jiralhanae pawns discovered this world's existence civil war would begin immediately. Though, any war fought with these tools of battle would be tipped in the Elite's favor.

Dyr entered one of the first tombs. He activated the Runes of Enlightenment and the Litanies of Inventory scrolled along the screens.

"Field Master Ul'kandee, this tomb contains true Ascetic Armor and weapons. Assign one of our Major Domos or Ultras to secure the bounty of our ancestors. There is much more we must accomplish here."

The Zealot walked alongside the Councilor. "I did not realize this place existed."

N'gyven nodded. "That is to be expected. But do not worry, brother. The Tariff of Secrets will soon be lifted and our species will be able to reclaim all we have set aside in our servitude."

"We will finish what we started so long ago."

The councilor laughed. "And this time, they will not use the Dreadnought against us. They will not defile such a holy artifact with their impure intentions ever again!"

A Minor Domo approached the higher ranking Sangheli. "Sirs, a message from Oracle Master Yeurâ€|"

The Domain, Sydney Australia

Oracle Master Yeur took a short breath as Councilor N'gyven appeared in the Communicator.

"Councilor, I have made contact with the humans. Their leadership wishes to speak with a representative of the College."

"I had expected that they might. I am pleased that they showed restraint and that you still live."

The elder Sangheli clicked his mandibles. "None more than myself, honored Councilor. Now, I present the human leadership."

Yeur stepped away from the communicator. Councilor N'gyven appraised the human leadership. They were all warriors. It spoke well of the humans.

The first to speak was a man wearing a white uniform resplendent in medals. "Elite Councilor, I am Lord Admiral Hood. The UNSC and our allies in the Imperium of Man demand confirmation of your Oracle Master's offer."

_The Imperium of Man? _"The Sangheli stand by their offer. We will not launch any offensives against human systems. The Sangheli, as is our right, defend ourselves in the face of any aggression."

One of the heavily armored soldiers looked towards a giant in golden armor. The golden human nodded. "Xenos Councilor, why stop the war at all? Your species has not slowed its onslaught in the past decades."

"I have earned my name, human. I am Councilor N'gyven Dyr! The Sangheli offer this truce because our coming wars with the Prophets and their slaves, the forces of the Abomination and the specter of the Flood loom on the horizon. Only the humans seem to recognize the threats facing all life."

The Golden Figure nodded. "The threat of the Abomination as you refer to Chaos, will always exist on the horizon. It is the twisted reflection of all life."

The Elite councilor grunted. "Then, it falls to the only species that recognize the sick parody of Chaos for what it is to contain it."

General Richardson practically growled. "What about prisoners of both sides? Your kind is the only Covenant Species that even takes prisoners."

"If they have honor, they will rise up and attempt to escape."

The human general spit on the ground. "That didn't answer my question, alien!"

Councilor N'gyven nodded. "If they fail and are incapacitated, or are too wounded to attempt to begin with, we shall exchange our prisoners at a later time. My people have no concept of trading prisoners."

A second human officer bearing many scars and wearing a pair of clawed gauntlets spoke next. "I am General Sturnn of the Cadian 412th. I fought your warriors in the first attack on Holy Terra. You didn't take prisoners in that battle. Why take them at all?"

Councilor N'gyven could feel of the fire of the humans. This was a species the Sangheli could respect! "Why do you take prisoners?"

It appeared that an outburst was about to erupt from the assembled humans. The Golden Figure silenced the crowd simply by lifting a hand and motioning to the cadre of warriors. "I can sense your sincerity, Councilor N'gyven. I am also aware that the Sangheli do not intend this truce to be permanent."

"It would not be realistic for our species to have a permanent truce. There is too much history between us." A chortling sound escaped from the Sangheli's throat. "Peace between the two factions that will become dominant in this galaxy is unlikely. Neither of our kind will strive for anything less than complete dominion over the entirety of our galaxy."

In the middle of the knot of humans, a deep voice boomed. "By the

Throne, a xenos who _gets it_."

Lord Hood took a deep breath. "We must discuss this. A moment, if you will."

"I concur."

A long moment passed as the humans discussed the proposal formally. After a time, Lord Hood, the Golden Figure and a man who had remained silent throughout the exchange approached the device.

"We accept your proposal, Sangheli."

Councilor N'gyven inclined his massive head. "Good. May we find honor and victory in the coming battles. And if we die, let us die well."

Weeping Shadows of Sorrow

Richard stood alone amongst the slain. The prison complex was the pyre of the illusion that the innate warrior's instincts of humans, Brutes and Elites could be contained. The rain of blood had not abated. If anything, it had come down harder.

After observing the glories of the Blood God, a realization dawned on Richard the Bloody-Handed. _The bloody rain was coalescing into Daemons. _The world itself was changing into one more suitable to the Lord of Skulls. Enormous Pillars of Bone erupted from the ground and a torrent of blood rushed between the pillars.

The Lesser Daemons stood at attention as one of their number emerged from the portal. The daemon wore bronze armor and a cape adorned with the skulls of the vanquished.

"**Richard the Bloody Handed! The Blood God has turned his gaze upon you! I am his Sacred Executioner, Skulltaker! I long for nothing more than to add your skull to our Lord's throne! He, instead, has commanded me to give you an order. Go to Earth. Kill everything.**"

Richard gripped his blades tighter. "I would duel you as well. But the wishes of Khorne supersede all. I shall pave the way."

"**Good. And one more thing mortal.**"

Richard was almost as annoyed by talking as the Demon.
"What?"

"**Change the name of your damn vessel.**"

Skulltaker, his chore complete, fell upon a knot of Bloodletters and butchered them. Richard watched as hundreds of the slain rose back to life. Brutes, humans and Elites stood in unison.

"**BLOOD FOR THE BLOOD GOD!**"

"**SKULLS FOR THE SKULL THRONE!**"

Installation 05

K'xon Rtau and the other Sangheli watched the walls for any enemies. There were many foes on this Ring. One of the younger warriors sniffed at the air.

"Honored Arbiter, what is that stench?" Disgust rolled off the Minor Domo's tounge.

The Arbiter laughed inwardly at the title. The moment of levity only lasted a second. He did recognize that stench. That hateful stench.

"It is the Parasite."

The assembled Elites ground their mandibles. The Parasite was the most dangerous enemy on Halo. The Flood had laid the Forerunners low. They could not be reasoned with or underestimated. It didn't take long for the air to grow cold. Suddenly, snow began to fall. The flakes fell lazily and made the hellish remnants of the Flood and Tyrannoforming seem almost whimsical. The small amount of natural flora was weighted down by the snow.

The Tyranid and Flood growths remained standing unhindered.

Another Minor Domo carrying a Covenant Carbine grunted. "The Locusts remain. I thought their kind had been eliminated by the humans."

Unnatural roars filled the air as the tram came to a stop at a destroyed junction. The Elites fanned out, some taking cover behind the still warm corpses of Flood Tank forms or Tyranid Warriors.

In the distance, their objective loomed. The Library of the Forerunners stood proud even amongst the horrors of the Parasite and the Great Devourer.

"It retains its majesty even surrounded by such filth!" A Major Domo shouted in a rare moment of emotion.

Kxon Rtau stared across the expanse. "And surrounded it is. The Parasite has infested numerous Covenant and human warriors. They have even stolen vehicles."

"The Great Journey must be earned."

There is no Great Journey. The Halos are weapons. The words of Sesa Refumee rang over and over in the Arbiter's mind.

"It will not wait for us, brothers. Come, the hopes of all the Covenant rest on our shoulders!" The Arbiter shouted to light the fire in his brethren. As one, the Sangheli advanced.

Installation 05, Tram Line

Plasma pistol fire washed off the Tactical Dreadnought armor like water off a slope. All around the Astartes lay the bodies of Covenant Warriors. Casimiro found it strange that there were no Elites. His observation was only fleeting as there were still Covenant warriors about.

"It's only one human! Kill the animal!" A Brute officer bellowed.

Casimiro tossed a torrent of lightning into a Grunt that was scrambling for a Shade turret. The Uggnoy screamed as warp energy cascaded through the alien's body.

The Space Marine Librarian had a moment of precognition and attempted to dive out of the way. Unfortunately, the sheer number of Fuel Rod shots was impossible to dodge.

The Chief Librarian of the Howling Griffons grunted through the pain. The fuel rod did not penetrate the Terminator Armor, but the sheer impact was felt. Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson had no doubt advanced toward the Index.

And it was unlikely they would face much Covenant resistance. It seemed every xenos on Halo was converging on his position.

"Brother-Librarian do you copy?"

Casimiro ducked instinctively behind the burnt out husk of a Covenant Spectre. "Brother-Captain Thomas, is that you?"

"Affirmative, Librarian Casimirio. We have teleport lock. We can extract you."

The Librarian took a deep breath and reached out. Commander Keyes and Johnson were advancing and facing no resistance. "I have completed my current objective. Ready for extraction."

An entire pack of Brutes advanced under the cover fire of a Phantom. Casimiro felt the familiar pull of the Warp and the smell of Ozone.

A heartbeat later, he opened his eyes. His battle-brothers and a collection of Chapter Serfs advanced to assist him.

Brother Captain Thomas nodded. "It is good that you survived."

"If Johnson and Keyes to not recover the Index before the Covenant does, my and all of our survival will be fleeting."

Lakeside Forerunner Facility

Sergeant Kolak ordered his squad to fan out. There had been very little Covenant Resistance since they joined up with the SPARTAN. The fighting on Halo had been as intense as any Rogal had ever experienced. Even Medusa V hadn't been quite this rough. At least there were Imperial controlled areas where they could get fresh supplies and if they were lucky, a hot meal.

Here on Haloâ€¦ There were no such luxuries.

"How we doing ammo wise?" Sgt. Keller called out.

There were several shouts of UNSC soldiers down to a handful of mags. On poor sod was out and was scrapping by with a Covenant Plasma pistol. There were less than nineteen shells for the mortar.

Private Keyon, a fellow Guardsmen, turned to his sergeant. "Sir, think we'll get lucky and get another supply drop from _In Amber

Clad?_"

"I don't think so, Private. Keep focused."

It was way too quiet. That was the thought on everyone's mind.

"Master Chief, Cortana are you picking up anything on the Battlenet?"

Cortana's voice played over the vox and radios. "I'm getting reports that the Covenant is having trouble with an Astartes! One with... magic? I know your technology can get really advanced, but still."

Corporal Hyran perked up. "That could be really good or really bad. It's either a Space Marine Librarian orâ€¦ wellâ€¦"

He didn't need to explain further.

"Let's keep moving. We don't want to keep the Prophet of Regret waiting."

Cortana's order was clear. The mixed squads of Imperials and UNSC soldiers moved out. The group eventually reached a tunnel. Master Chief took point he advanced to a junction and motioned for the others to follow. They made it several feet before the ceiling collapsed.

"FUCK!" One of the marines shouted as a wounded Tyranid thrashed around in the impossibly collapsed rubble. It was a strange creature with a bloated sac for a belly and a giant gun orifice on its back. The Tyranid rolled onto its feet.

The Biovore hissed at the humans and charged. It barreled into UNSC Corporal Wallace and the impact sent the man tumbling off the edge. The others immediately opened fire with lasguns and assault rifles. The beast roared in pain as it died.

"Wally! Can you hear me? You all right?!" One of the Guardsmen yelled.

"Yeah. I'm fucking great! I landed in a whorehouse and there's kegs full of beer!"

Sergeant Keller laughed. "We're sending down a rope. Grab one of those kegs and bring it up with you."

Corporal Wallace grabbed onto the rope and climbed up. He was pulled over the ledge by two of the soldiers.

"You forgot the kegs." Guard Private Oland said through a toothy grin.

"Fuck you buddy, I think I landed in Nid or Flood guts."

Corporal Magalan shook his head. "Cut it out. Let's move."

Nai Vacan, the group's Vox Man was trying to reach Master Chief and Cortana.

"Say again, Cortana. Say again."

"â€| Status. What is your Status, over."

"Our status isâ€|" Vacan looked toward the marines. Private Richards mouthed _green_.

"Green, our status is green."

Cortana sounded relieved. "That's good. We need to link back up as soon as possible. Contact us every hour."

Sergeant Keller scanned the area. "Yes ma'am, next contact in six-zero minutes."

Sergeant Kolak nodded. "Alright ladies. We won't link up with the Chief and Cortana standing around here."

Private Richards and Oland took point. Eventually the silence and continuous medicinally clean grey corridors began to grate on the soldiers. Generally, when it's been this quiet for this long, you are walking into an ambush. The advance slowed as a tinge of wariness passed over the humans.

Their caution was rewarded.

"Spread out my brethren! Kill any Sangheli and humans you come across. Our Prophets have placed their trust in us! We are their chosen!"

A Jiralhanae leapt onto one of the strange Forerunner stones and roared.

"Fuck, he's got a hammer." Richards breathed. Around the head Brute, five more Brutes milled around. One kicked over a dead Elite.

Oland patted him on the shoulder. "Let's back to the others. We've got to report this."

The two human warriors slid back and thankfully were not noticed.

Oland fidgeted with his lasgun. "Bosses, we've got a problem."

Keller grunted. "We're on Halo. If we didn't have a problem, I'd start getting nostalgic."

"There are Brutes on the Rings. They aren't just hunting us. A Brute warlord said that the Prophets want them to kill Elites too."

Corporal Wallace raised an eyebrow. "Brutes and Elites are on the same side."

Kolak checked the charge on his las carbine. "Well, it doesn't sound like it any more. It doesn't matter to us joes anyway. Brutes and Elites are still aliens and they will still try to kill us. We'll keep pushing towards Regret's position. That's where the Chief will

be."

The Squad followed Orland and Richards to where they had found the Brutes. Sure enough, the highly territorial aliens were still there. They had set up crates and weapons lockers.

The xenos leader was directing his soldiers. "Are the jammers online?"

One of the lesser Brutes pounded his chest. "Yes, my chieftain. We have set them up as the Prophet of Deception has instructed. Human and Sangheli transmissions will be blocked."

A sarcastic _whoopee _was whispered by one of the humans. Kolak signaled for Waljan to move forward. The plasma-gunner slinked forward and the others gathered round.

"Ok, here's the plan. Waljan, ruin the ape with the hammer's day. Everyone else, drop the others. Try not to damage their weapons. We need to salvage them."

Private Kenyon licked his lips. "Sir, isn't that technically a sin?"

"We'll go to confessional when we find a priest and get the hell off of Horus's vacation home."

Ross nodded. "Alright boys, time to earn our paychecks. Kenyon and Jackson make sure you conserve mortar shells."

The humans got into position. "I'm going to fire on three." Waljan whispered from his position.

Threeâ€| twoâ€| oneâ€|

The first sound that betrayed the ambush was the hiss of the rapidly cooling crater in the chieftain's chest. Brutes scrambled for cover. The humans concentrated their fire on individual Jiralhanae. It took large amounts of fire to break through the incredible toughness of the Brutes.

Suddenly, the battle was joined. Covenant Plasma raked a Brute position. A cache of plasma grenades exploded and the last Brute died from plasma burns.

A pair of Covenant Vehicles advanced into the open. An Elite emerged from the Shadow Combat Bus and looked in the general direction of the humans. He raised a hand above his head.

The seeming carelessness of the Elites shocked the humans. The Elite's next action shattered any and all expectations they had.

"Humans! There is a necessity to converse!"

"Great, as if butchering our worlds weren't enough. Now those bastards have to butcher our language too!" Corporal Wallace spat.

Ross Keller shook his head. "Sangheli never talk. They know where we

are. If they wanted to attack, they would have already."

"So, what should we do? They did attack the Brutes." Private Jackson asked.

"They want to talk, let's talk. It'll help us save ammo. Besides, if things go to shit, we're in cover. They aren't."

"So, who wants to chit-chat with the xenos?" Corporal Magalan questioned nervously.

"I'll do it." Keller said with resignation.

"Well, Elite, what is there a necessity to talk about?"

The Elite was silent for a second as it fumbled for the right words. "Our enemies are the same. At the present, Oracle Master Yuer has delivered the College's offer to cease and desist in Sangheli attacks on your warriors."

"I guess that doesn't include the apes and other Covenant forces?"

"Tragedy it is, but only the Mgalekgolo of the Domains Uyaralekgolo, Qanaanlekgolo and Iaosalekgolo have sided with us in the cease of war."

Kenyon looked around. "What the fuck is he saying?" Jackson shrugged his shoulders.

Ross was just as confused. "The what?"

A harsh bark escaped the Elite. Sgt. Kolak struggled to keep the squad from firing.

"Appologies, human. You know the Mgalekgolo as Hunters. Only three of the Domains have agreed to side with the Sangheli."

"What about the other Covenant?"

The Elite snapped with his mandibles. "The Ugru Grunts will follow whoever commands them. The 'Jackals', the Kig-yar, are scum. They fight for profit, not faith or honor. As long as the Prophets pay them the Kig-Yar will fight for them."

Keller took a deep breath. _I'm fucking nuts_. He stood and walked into the open. "So, why are you talking to us?"

The Elite made a strange gurgling sound. "You are superb fighters and we can kill more Jiralhanae together than apart."

"Before we agree, how many of you are there?"

"There are three mighty Sangheli in our group!"

"Give me a minute." Keller dropped back into cover.

"What do you guys think?"

Corporal Wallace spit on the ground. "I think we found the craziest

damn Elite on this whole Ring."

Maljan hefted his plasma gun. "Well, we do have this and the mortar. Kenyon's a genius when it comes to rigging up something that explodes."

Rogal chuckled. "So, we team up with the crazy alien to go kill other aliens?"

"That basically covers it, sir." Oland deadpanned.

Keller popped back up from cover. "Alright, we agree. I'm not going to call you guys Elite Number One, Elite Number Two and Elite Number Three. So, what are your names?"

"I am N'tho Sraomee! My brothers are T'kyn Nakanee and J'han Sirmee."

"Alright then, I'm Sergeant Ross Keller. This is Sergeant Rogal Kolakâ€|"

Forerunner Tunnel System

It had been almost an hour since John and Cortana were separated from the marines and Guardsmen.

"Has there been any contact with Kolak and Keller?" Master Chief asked as he entered an underwater tunnel.

"Negative, Chief. I haven't heard anything but I'm getting a lot of jamming in the area."

The cyborg's reply died on his lips as he took cover behind a rocky outcropping. A Phalanx of Jackals were pelting the SPARTAN's position with Neelder fire. John emerged from cover long enough to hurl a grenade into the gaggle of avian-like aliens.

The fire ceased and Master Chief advanced. The Elites directing the defense of the underwater tunnel were struggling to prevent the Grunts from fleeing.

Time blurred and bled together as Chief entered into an intense combat focus. He drew his Battle Rifle and placed a burst into the most vocal Elite. The Sangheli turned to face the charging Demon. The alien could not react fast enough to dodge the Plasma Grenade.

"AAARGH!"

The scream lasted only a moment before the explosion tore the Sangheli apart. Master Chief was so close to the explosion that his shields nearly dropped. If the Uggnoy had not routed, they could have slain the Spartan with sheer weight of fire.

A moment after the Forerunner gate at the end of the corridor closed, Cortana piped up.

"Chief! That was an Ultra! We must be getting close to Regret!"

It's about time. Chief thought as he exchanged his empty submachine gun for a Plasma Rifle.

Forerunner Hover-tram station

Sergeant Johnson was never so glad to see a grey wall. The tram had finally reached the end of the line. Hopefully, that meant they were close to the Index.

"You know, I was actually beginning to miss the repetitive grey corridors." Commander Keyes said, desperate for some levity.

"I had my fill of those on the first Halo."

Johnson said completely devoid of humor. Commander Keyes took a deep breath. "My father died on one of these Rings."

Johnson turned to the young Commander. "He was a damn good man. He'd be proud of you. He also asked me to keep you safe."

"Thanks, Sergeant. Do you actually know what the Index looks like?"

"Never saw it myself. According to Cortana and the Chief, it was a T shaped device. ONI quickly clamped down on anything related to the Halos though."

Commander Keyes advanced to the next piece of cover. "Since when did that ever stop you?"

Johnson laughed. "Never." There was a pause. "Cortana thinks it may be more of a targeting device than a safety. But honestly? Who knows? Forerunner stuff makes us look like we just learned to walk upright."

Keyes peered down the hall. "Why is it so quiet? You'd think the Library would be overrun with Covenant, Tyranids or Flood."

Johnson advanced further down the corridor and immediately motioned for Keyes to stay put. A pair of Flood Combat Forms hobbled down the hall. There was no sign of Flood-forming in the area.

The veteran Sergeant slinked back to Miranda. "We've got Flood in the area. That means Halo will start deploying Sentinels to control the outbreak. Those flying cans will target us as well as the Flood."

The Navy commander flashed an exhausted nervous smile. "Guess I shouldn't have said anything."

"Thou Shalt Never Taunt Murphy."

Flood Containment Zone outside of the Library

The Arbiter impaled a charging Combat Form on his Plasma Sword. All around the small knot of Elites, the bodies of Flood Forms lay sprawled out on the snowy ground. Flood corpses did not stay corpses for long. Every so often, an Infection Form would scuttle over to a broken Combat Form and revive the husk.

The Sangheli had managed to advance nearly halfway towards their objective before being surrounded on a hill.

Kxon Rtau sometimes found his footing difficult. The blood of two of his fallen brothers had turned the snow into sticky slurry.

"Stand firm!" The commander of the warrior detachment shouted.

All of the collected warriors were prepared to sell their lives dearly. Then, fate finally smiled upon them. A flight of Phantoms and Banshees bombarded the Flood. It was a blessed respite. The Phantoms deposited squads of Elites and even a pair of Mgalekgolo.

Rtas Vadumee was one of the last to exit a transport. His expression was dark and exhausted.

"Hail Arbiter."

The Arbiter deactivated his Plasma Sword. "Hail, Commander Vadumee. I assume your mission to extinguish the Locusts was successful?"

"The Locusts have been destroyed. A human Demon activated one of their atomic weapons."

The Arbiter remembered the nature of humanity's atomic weaponry. "I doubt he survived."

"I am not so sure, Arbiter. The human Demons have a tendency to survive against all rights."

A Phantom hovered nearby. "We must get to the Sacred Icon!" The Arbiter did not wish to dwell on the human demons. Their actions had led to his branding with the Mark of Shame.

Rtas handed a Fresh Plasma Rifle to his comrade. "The Phantom will take you and a squad into the Library. The rest of our force shall work to secure this place. If we all rush into the Library, the Parasite will envelop and destroy us."

"I understand, brother." The Arbiter boarded the Phantom and was thankful for the moment. It allowed for him to renew his focus. The pilot announced that they had reached the landing point.

Absolution was nearly within the grasp of the Covenant. Perhaps, the Writ of Union would survive until the end.

Suspected Forerunner Temple Island

Plasma fire greeted Master Chief even before the light of the system's star. John ran through the dangerously exposed beach. In an example of the universe's love of irony, the SPARTAN found himself taking shelter in the embrace of the Prophet of Regret

"Cortana, can you trace this transmission?"

"One moment. _Found 'em!_ He's in the primary Temple."

Master Chief popped up and fired a burst of Plasma into an Elite that had emerged from cover to advance on his position.

Cortana made a sound of surprise. "Well, this is interestingâ€¦"

"Please tell me Earth is sending backup."

"Wish it were. I've intercepted an exchange of transmissions between Regret and a Prophet of Truth. Here's Truth's message: _Regret, your headstrong actions have endangered the Covenant itself! Your premature attack on Earth has set in motion a chain of events that may be beyond our control._"

John rolled away from the holographic transmission of Regret's sermon and into another position.

"Regret's reply was just as telling. _Honored Truth, I acknowledge that my actions may appear rash. However, I have nearly secured the Sacred Icon! My Brother Hierarch, my 'headstrong' actions will open the gates! The Great Journey is upon us! Far from endangering the Covenant, I will save it!_"

The SPARTAN-II leapt to his feet and advanced. As he moved up the beach, Covenant soldiers fell. Only Elites and a handful Jackals fell back to more secure position. The Grunts ran in little circles and waved their arms and shouted.

Cortana flashed a nav-point in Chief's HUD. "There is the main door to Regret's location. You are only a few dozen meters away!"

She says it like there aren't dozens of Covenant swarming over the beachâ€¦!"

The Library

A burst of data flashed amongst the Forerunner network. The Flood had broken containment. Also, scanners had detected possible infection vectors.

Sentinels were deployed because the Flood had already expanded to untenable levels. There was a very severe and very real possibility that a Compound Mind had been formed. Aggressive Containment protocols were reinstated.

As the Sentinel forces reactivated, Johnson and Keyes quickly advanced to the Index. The UNSC soldiers had encountered only scattered Flood and Sentinel patrols. Luckily, the two forces were more interested in destroying each other than even acknowledging the two human soldiers.

"Johnson, it looks like there is a large chamber ahead! It must be where the Index is located!" Keyes shouted.

Johnson wheeled around and fired a burst of plasma into a small tide of scuttling Infection Forms. "Good, let's get this thing and get back to the _IAC_"

A chime filled the air as the door to the chamber slid open. In the center of the room was the Prize of Prize, the Icon.

"Get the Icon, Commander. I'll make sure we don't get surprised by any nasties."

Miranda Keyes walked up to the Icon. She suddenly realized she was treating it with reverence. That smacked of the Covenant. She took a deep breath and grabbed it.

"Got it! Watch out!"

A shadowy figure stalked forward and Johnson was knocked back from some kind of physical blow. Miranda drew her Plasma rifle and fired a few shots. The shots impacted against an energy shield.

An Elite! Miranda's mind screamed. The Sangheli's Active Camo fell and the naval commander caught a glimpse of the ornate armor. A heart beat later; there was intense pressure on her arm as the alien lifted her off the ground. It tore the Icon from her hand and dropped her. She looked up and watched as the Elite cradled the Icon.

"Well done Arbiter." A voice boomed through the chamber.

That voice! Kxon Rtau's mind raged.

"**Tartarus!** What are you doing here?! This task is mine. Your time to behold the Sacred Icon will come."

The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae trembled with rage. "Time! **This. Is. Our. Time!**"

Tartarus charged. Miranda scrambled out of the way of the charging Brute. The Elite could not react in time. The Silver-haired Jiralhanae struck the Elite in the gut with the shaft of the largest Gravity Hammer Keyes had ever seen. The Index fell to the ground with a _clang_.

"When! when the Prophets learn of your betrayal!
Tartarus!"

Tartarus laughed. "Betrayal? Who do you think blessed my actions?"

The Sangheli's look of utter disbelief and the weight of the truth was _art_ to the Brute's eyes. Tartarus lashed out and struck Kxon with a vicious uppercut. The force of the blow lifted the Arbiter several feet in the air. The unconscious form of the Sangheli's Unifier and former Blade of the Prophets fell into the gaping maw that formerly housed the Sacred Icon in an embrace of anti-gravity.

"Scurry Little human. I enjoy hunting." Tartarus hadn't fought humans personally since the war began. He was savoring the moment. The tiny human female rolled over in one hand she gripped the Sacred Icon and in the other a stolen Plasma Rifle.

The Chieftain of the Brutes casually smacked the weapon out of the female's hands and hauled her to her feet. "Your necessity is all that is keeping you alive."

Two other Brutes advanced from behind their Chieftain roughly dragging the wounded form of Sergeant Johnson.

"What about this one, Chieftain?"

Tartarus didn't answer them for a long moment. He simply stared at the Sacred Icon sitting in his trembling hands. Soon, his species and the rest of the faithful would ascend. They would be free of their mortal shells and safe from the ravages of the Flood and from the slavery of the Elites.

"Take him with us. Humans are so fragile. I'd rather not have to scour the Ring for a replacement if one of them were to break."

Tartarus cradled the Sacred Icon. It struck him that something so physically small encompassed all the dreams of his entire species.

Forerunner Temple Complex

Flames licked at the energy shield of the MJOLNIR armor. Chief had been advancing steadily until the arrival of a Sangheli Spectre. The Plasma Turret had him pinned down. A near miss had even ignited the grass at his feet.

"Movement, Eleven o'clock at twenty meters. It looks like a small group of Elites."

Sierra-117 shifted positions and tried to move to a more advantageous position. He was moving so quickly that he lacked the luxury of dodging the Elite corpses at his feet. A silent advance was impossible as Sangheli bone audibly cracked under the two tons of augmented human. His HUD flashed as his shields were struck by a well aimed Carbine shot.

John reared back and tossed his last frag grenade into the quartet of Minor Domos. The explosion tore one luckless Sangheli apart, but merely dropped or depleted the shields of the others. It was a near miracle that he reached the position he selected. The Plasma turret continued to spit death in the Spartan's direction. Plasma rifle and Needler fire surged from the surviving Minor Domos.

Warning, shields depleted flashed on his visor. The auditory warning coursed through his ears. He waited a heartbeat for the generator to recycle his protective barrier. He grabbed a second Plasma Rifle from a dead Sangheli. John rose from cover, suffering a smattering of Needles for his trouble, but the barrage from his one weapons cut down one of the charging aliens. The others dove for cover.

The Spectre was now his primary concern. Master Chief looked for any advantage.

He found it in the strangest of places. Quickly, he activated and planted his remaining three Plasma Grenades into a small depression at the base of one of the massive evergreens that populated the island. John-117 moved behind the tree and an eyeblink later, the explosion destroyed the root system of the mighty tree.

Master Chief leapt up onto the falling pine-like tree and ran down the trunk towards the entrance to the temple. All the while, firing with his Plasma Rifles at any target that presented themselves.

"Timber!" Cortana shouted with more than a little amount of glee.

The Elites in the Spectre were dumbfounded by the tactic and could not get out of the way before nearly twelve and a half tons of lumber crushed their vehicle.

John leapt from the branches and landed less than a meter from the door. The door slid open and Chief was greeted by a sight that few had seen and fewer had lived to tell about.

A Sangheli Honor Guard was barreling towards him with a Plasma-bladed Halberd at the ready. He immediately opened fire, but the Elite of the Elites had been gifted with far stronger energy shields than even a Zealot.

The pair of Covenant weapons overheated a split-second after his shields had collapsed. The Master Chief Petty Officer tossed both weapons to the side and sprinted forward to meet the Sangheli in combat. If an unaugmented human or lesser Covenant species had witnessed the charge, they would have only seen a blur of color.

Master Chief quickly drew his battle rifle and squeezed off a burst. The armor of the Honor Guard was as solid as it ornate. Only one of the bullets hit home. The Sangheli cried out with a combination of rage and pain. He swung his halberd in a vicious overhead slice. Chief quickly tried to dodge, but the quick attack managed to carve through his still depleted shields and chop off a sliver of his armor. John's sidestep allowed him to lash out with his battle rifle. The strike hit home and sent the Elite sprawling. Sangheli curses erupted from the alien's mouth as he leapt to his feet. Sierra-117 hopped back in an attempt to dodge the strike and instinctively brought his rifle up in an attempt to block the plasma weapon. The attempt was doomed to failure as the Plasma sliced effortlessly through the human weapon. The Spartan barely managed to dodge the follow through attack. He did, however, manage to grab the shaft of the weapon. Man and Sangheli struggled for control of the deadly weapon. In a moment of clarity, Chief fell back on an age old human tactic.

He cheated.

The Spartan lashed out with a snap kick and the Elite howled in pain as the creature's knee both hyper extended and shattered under the force of the kick. The Sangheli was a testament to his race as he continued to fight even through the mind numbing pain. In the midst of his collapse, he drew and fired a Covenant Plasma Pistol until it overheated. Master Chief's grip remained strong on the weapon. He whirled the halberd to a proper position and brought the humming plasma blade down upon the alien's neck. The hiss of evaporating blood was the only sound. John caught his breath. The battle only lasted a heartbeat, but it had been a primal fight for survival.

The human was surprised by the lightness of the weapon he now possessed.. He gripped the weapon tight as he barged into the central chamber. In the center of the makeshift chapel was the Prophet of Regret himself.

"I do not fear you Demon!" The Prophet shouted as he slammed his fist on the armrest of his Gravity Throne.

"Chief! Outta the way!" Cortana shouted. John heeded her advice and dove to the side just as a beam of energy slammed into the wall. The alloy that the room was constructed was singed at the point of impact.

John thumbed the Halberd to life as he bounded over the guard rail towards the lower level.

"I shall end you! You're a stain upon this galaxy just like the rest of your mongrel race!" Regret bellowed. His voice was hoarse from rage, but John noticed something else in his enemy's ranting. _Fear_.

The Prophet drew a pistol and fired in John's direction. There was a clicking noise. Master Chief realized what it was and jumped as high and as far as he could. The gravity cannon fired at Chief's former position and obliterated a Covenant Weapons locker.

The force of Spartan-117's landing actually forced the Gravity Throne to sag. The throne's anti-grav generators struggled to compensate for the intense extra weight.

"I will see you in Hell, Demon!"

"Save me a spot." John growled as he stabbed the Halberd into the Prophet's chest. A spray of blood erupted as Chief hopped off the throne.

"Good jobâ€¦ Oh god, I'm detecting Slipspace Rupturesâ€¦"

John realized that couldn't be good and exited the chamber. He emerged on a pier like structure over the massive lake. As he looked to the sky, the largest space vessel the Spartan and AI construct had ever seen emerged from Slipspace. Then the first Covenant vessels arrived. Then more and more returned to reality.

There were thousands. A Covenant Super Carrier was headed for Chief's position. The Gravity Column used to deploy troops was charging.

"We have to leave! Now Chief!" Cortana's panicked cries filled his comm. The Spartan ran just as a massive column of manipulated gravity utterly annihilated the chamber he had just dueling Regret in. The expanding fluxuations tossed him like a ragdoll. John lost consciousness as he hit the water. His vast bulk was sinking rapidly towards the bottom.

Then, from the depths, a necrotic tentacle grasped the limp form of the Spartan.

"_This is not your grave, but you are welcome in it._"

There was only silence as the darkness of the depths beckoned.

18. Chapter 18

The Gate of Chaos

Eliphas the Inheritor strode down the corridors of his personal vessel. All parted before his new form. The freshly ascended Daemon Prince was nearly as tall as a Dreadnought. Eliphas was still adjusting to his new legs. The knee joints had reversed from his frail mortal form and his feet were now hooves. Warp energy rippled across his scaled body and lightning-like arcs erupted from the three horns extending from his now lupine head.

His Coryphaeus Aelous approached with his arms extended and face low in deference to his master. "My Apostle, your forces are gathering. The Host now numbers a full thousand Bearers of the Word and nearly nine million lesser faithful. The Dark Mechanicus has promised a Titan to your cause."

A voice like cooling magma erupted from the Demon Prince. "Well done Coryphaeus Aelous. What news of Kentarus and First Acolyte Iulianus?"

"My Apostle, they are overseeing the assemblage of your fleet. The Firestorm frigates have only just been repaired."

Eliphas smiled, a highly unnatural gesture given his new Daemonic form. He remembered capturing those two vessels in their attack on the Imperial world of Huntsbrige. It was his first victory after being released from the Basilica of Torments. Holy Lorgar had meant it as a test before he was sent to this new Galaxy to sanctify it in the name of the Chaos Gods.

"Very well. Holy Lorgar calls upon all Apostles to deploy in two days. Our attack on Earth is soon!"

"As my Apostle and my Primarch wills." The Terminator armored Coryphaeus turned and left to carry out his orders.

The Terminator waded through the hundreds of slaves preparing the star-conquering vessels of the Word Bearers fleet. He passed the Chamber of Glories and allowed himself the luxury of viewing the spoils of the Host's victories. The silvered head of the Ork Warlord Gutrippa stared in mute shock. Aelous remembered the day they had smashed the barbaric Greenskins on Geina III. The helmets of half a dozen Slave Astartes chapters were the focal point of the chamber. The center helmets were from the Ultramarines Chapter. One had been claimed by Eliphas on Kronus during the opening battles of the Long War. The other was taken a few months after the Apostle's penance in the Basilica had been completed. It had been Aelous's first battle as Coryphaeus. Elements of the Ultramarines 5th Company had been attempting to stop the Righteous and their liberation of the Hive World Alkan. Captain Galenus had escaped, but the Company Champion had fallen to Eliphas's Crozius. Aelous himself had earned much glory in the fighting. He had personally wiped out an entire Tactical Squad and proceeded to silence the Imperial Guard artillery threatening the Faithful's advance. His moment of personal reflection was over. Aelous continued on and eventually found the Sorcerer Kentarus and First Acolyte Iulianus performing the Rites of the Icon. Three of the Icon Bearers for the Kindreds had fallen to the Forerunner Constructs prior to the Great Awakening. The First Acolyte had been carrying out the rites that would properly sanctify the individuals chosen to carry the standards of each Kindred.

As the newly elevated Icon bearers departed, Aelous approached his comrades. "Holy Eliphas demands a progress report. Will the Host be ready to depart when The Urizen wills?"

First Acolyte Iulianus nodded. "As soon as the Gorgon is secured, we will be ready. Overseer Halaj says it will be ready within two hours."

"Efficient as always, First Acolyte. You serve the Host well."

"Bearing the Word is my sole purpose."

The Coryphaeus grinned. "As it is for all sons of Lorgar. Our host shall be at the forefront of the destruction of the False Emperor's forces. The Dark Gods shall see us to victory!"

Seongnam, Korea

The UNSC base was beehive of activity. UNSC marines had been using this research facility as a command center for the defense of Seoul. An Imperial Guard Trojan tractor was towing an older anti-aircraft gun into a prepared position.

Amir Lancaster, one of the hundreds of military scientists of Seongnam's Special Warfare Center, navigated the controlled chaos of the fortification attempts. He was headed for a meeting with some associates when an Imperial Guardsman held up a hand.

"Excuse me, sir. You'll have to wait a second."

Lancaster nodded. "I just need to pass, I have a meeting."

"I understand sir. We've got a lander incoming. Pyongyang Station just cleared it to enter orbit. It'll be landing in three minutes."

Amir looked up as the sound of thunder was heard. The Imperial Guard lander was an impressive ship, but like most of the Imperium's vehicles it was battered and old. Dr. Lancaster doubted that the Imperium even knew the engineering principles behind the construction of such a craft. Their idea of preventative maintenance probably involved some incense and a whole lot of chanting. The craft landed and the doors practically roared as they opened. The young Guardsmen nodded.

"You can pass now, sir."

Amir smiled faintly. "Thank you."

He didn't trust the Imperium, but he wasn't going to be rude. They were bringing millions of troops and shielded vessels to support the defense of Earth.

Eventually, he reached the location of his meeting. He knocked twice, waited a heartbeat and knocked twice more.

The door opened and his colleagues opened the door.

"I've never seen you late before Amir."

Amir sat down in one of the chairs and chuckled. "A Guard lander touched down a few feet from me. The Imperium doesn't do subtle, evidently."

Gregory Westhall laughed along with his co-worker. "You could have never guessed from their Titans. Anyway, how'd you get out of the lab?"

Amir poured some tea. "I told them I had to check the calibration of the Collider."

The woman who opened the door, Sgt. Amy Collins took a deep breath. "Now that we are all here, we need to discuss our new 'friends'."

Frank Gardens took a sip of his green tea. "They've practically taken over! The 'Adeptus Mechanicus' is responsible for millions of dollars in damage! That damned mecha they just activated, what did they call it? Right! That 'Warlord' Titan's steps threw off the balance of my experiments. There are micro fractures throughout the projectors!"

Colonel Ah Kumix Uinicob shook his head. "How can they think that's an effective design? Give me a tank any day. "

Amir swirled the tea in his cup. "They're fanatics. Everything they do smacks of the Covenant. I've been fighting zealots for nearly my entire life. I remember who took my arm when Skopje fell! They also took the only two remotely working Anti-matter prototypes. It's taken me three years to get them working! Now, they're glorified mines."

"Not to mention the losses on Reach." Amy said with the pain evident in every word.

Kumix shook his head. "We lost so much on Reach, Halsey, my companyâ€¦"

Amir leaned forward. "We aren't going to let all we've sacrificed to keep the UNSC and UEG alive just to let the Imperium waltz in and absorb us. But, it would be suicidal to even voice dissatisfaction with our new 'allies' right now. I suggest that we try to gather and begin some form of political resistance to any Imperial attempts to annex the UNSC after we survive the coming battle."

Frank laughed in between sips. "Still as confident as ever. Heck, I haven't seen you this adamant about anything since the time you stole Cathy's car back at Oxford."

Lancaster's face went blank. "There is no proof that I had anything to do with the theft and subsequent changes to the Dr. Halsey's car and its paintjob."

Colonel Uinicob cleared his throat. "Alright, if you two are done reminiscing about your college days, I suggest we clear out. If we waste anymore time, people will start asking questions. And considering it'd be ONI and the Imperial Commissariat asking the questions, I'd rather not be asked."

The gathered officers and scientists slipped out and went their separate ways. Amir struggled to hide his annoyance as he passed a collection of Techpriests praying to a long range communications device. Faith had a place in the universe, but it wouldn't replace the scientific method. Amir recalled his favorite quote from Galileo.

"I do not feel obliged to believe that the same God who has endowed us with sense, reason, and intellect has intended us to forgo their use."

European Russia

The very ground shivered in awe at each tread of the God-Machine's footsteps. The mighty Emperor Titan stood dozens of fathoms above all other constructs. A banner dozens of feet long hung between the legs of the behemoth. Every inch of the banner was covered in kill markings, campaign badges and other glories _Diluculo da Bellum_ had earned in its two thousand years of service. Warhound and Warlord titans patrolled the surrounding area.

Magos Micel reveled in the display of the Mechanicus's power. He realized there was no subtlety in the power arrayed before him. There was no need for subtlety. Titans were as much of a symbol as a weapon of war. Their very form was a statement of Mankind's defiance in the face of an uncaring universe. The weapons were the instruments of Mankind's conquest of the myriad foes arrayed against the children of Mars and Terra.

Arc-Magos Yesl Gho approached Brafor. Magos Micel couldn't help but notice the lightning arc emblem beneath the traditional Mechanicus Cog effect. The Arc-Magos was the energy that welded the many sects and factions of the Mechanicus together. The fact that the Fabricator-General would send one of his top ranking aides continued to puzzle the Magos.

"The glories of the Omnissiah are manifest, Magos."

"They are, Arc-Magos. If I may be so bold, how shall we ensure the safety of these most glorious and noble machines?"

Arc-Magos's artificial eyes whirled as they focused on the distant form of a Warlord Titan striding over a hill. "There is an old facility nearby. Built long ago, during the period where our species first expanded throughout Sol. It is a spacecraft construction facility. There is an entrance capable of sheltering the Engines from Covenant Orbital Bombardment."

"Excellent, Arc-Magos. What does the Mechanicus require of me?"

"Return to Korea. The research facilities there are inventing incredible technologies. The pagans and traitors must not secure it. We need an Adeptus Mechanicus representative there."

Magos Micel bowed. "As you command, Arc-Magos. Where shall you be fighting?"

Yesl stood impassively. "I shall be leading the defense of Mars with a UNSC Colonel named Ackerson."

"May the Ommissiah grant us victory."

High Charity, Chamber of the Hierarchs

The Prophet of Mercy sat in quiet disbelief. He barely registered Truth's entry into the Chamber. The Prophet of Regret was dead; killed by the Demon. The Elites had failed in their sacred and sole duty.

"Prophet of Mercy, do not despair."

The ancient Hierarch looked up from his throne. "Our third member is dead. We will need to elevate another to our ranks."

I do not intend on diluting power any more. "Do not worry, my friend. Tartarus has secured the Sacred Icon. However, we must discuss what to do with the failures of the Sangheli."

Mercy wheeled around. "They must be dealt with! Their failures and heresies cannot be ignored! The loss of the First Halo, Sesa Rafumee and now the death of a Hierarch!"

Truth interlocked his hands. "We must elevate the Jiralhanae. They have served us very well. Tartarus and his people are as militarily capable as the Elites. However, their faith is stronger."

Mercy nodded and a gray hair fell to the ground. "Yes! The Sangheli have been skirting the Writ of Union as well. The development of the Carbine is an example."

"I will have Tartarus and his ranking Chiefs report to us shortly."

Mercy sat straighter. "They will be our blade that excises the Elites' Heresy."

"A bold step." _But one I guided you to take._

Mercy nodded. "One that must be taken to ensure the purity of our Covenant before we undertake the Great Journey."

"So be it." Truth fought desperately to hide a smile. _And thus, power is concentrated where it belongs. The Hands of the Prophets and in the Prophets alone._

Space surrounding Installation 05

The Strike Cruiser _Primarch's Vengeance_ drifted in the outer system. It was attempting to avoid detection by the thousands upon thousands of Covenant vessels that had suddenly exited slipspace.

Commissar Halvorsen walked amongst the wounded soldiers. He was a morale officer and now his services were needed more than ever. The Commissar also wanted to stay out of the way of the Astartes. Halvorsen knew nothing of naval combat and did not want to interfere.

"Commissar! Have you heard anything from _In Amber Clad?_" The

wounded Marine's voice was weak. The Commissar quietly motioned for a medic as he knelt.

"We haven't heard anything solidier. They are practicing good discipline and evasion techniques."

"XO McMaster is a good officer."

Halvorsen didn't know the executive officer personally. "He is a fine officer and I'm sure we'll link up with him and the In Amber Clad before too long. Get some rest, marine."

The medic arrived and began looking over the soldier. Commissar Halvorsen left the triage center. He was now curious about the fate of In Amber Clad and was seeking out anyone who could sate his curiosity. Eventually, he found an Astartes Sergeant.

"Honored Astartes, may I ask if you have any news of the situation facing us and In Amber Clad?"

The Astartes looked down at the Commissar. "I am sorry, Commissar. We have not heard anything from the other human vessel."

"Would it be permissible for me to head to the bridge?"

The Astartes nodded. "Currently, we are not in combat. I will send word."

"Thank you, Sergeant."

The Space Marine nodded and continued on his way. Commissar Halvorsen reached the bridge of the Strike Cruiser. He was permitted entrance by the pair of Astartes Scouts guarding the entrance.

"The formation of the Covenant Vessels isn't a normal defensive formation." Casimiro stated as he stared at the viewscreen. The obvious split between probable factions in the Covenant Fleet was clear even to the Commissar's untrained eyes.

"A single spark will likely destroy any lingering loyalty to the Covenant from one of the factions."

Commissar Halvorsen was noticed by Battle-Brother Rhys. "Commissar, it is good to see you again."

"It is good to see you as well, Space Marine. The Guardsmen and UNSC marines are asking about the fate of In Amber Clad and the crew that remained on board."

The giant shook his head. "We have not heard anything from In Amber Clad. We are trying to detect them, but there are nearly three thousand Covenant Vessels between us and Halo. There is a nearly equal number on the other side."

A sudden alarm erupted. "Active scanners! We've been detected by Covenant vessels."

"The Sensorium estimates nearly thirty vessels!" A Serf shouted as he manipulated the runes.

Captain Gregori of the Howling Griffons moved to the center of the bridge. "That isn't a Sangheli formation. The numbers are also off for standard Sangheli strike forces."

"Lances charged!" One of the Chapter Serfs shouted. Another announced that torpedoes were loaded.

"Target the lead ship. I want Warp Engines ready to jump as soon as the lead ship has been destroyed."

The lances and torpedoes were the embodiment of the ship's name. The lance and first wave of torpedoes collapsed the shields in a single volley. The second volley of torpedoes and weapon battery fire ravaged the lead ship. Explosions wracked the ship as it died.

"Enemy ships are now approaching two hundred thousand kilometers!" One of the Serfs shouted.

"Time to Warp Jump?"

"Five secondsâ€¦ Ready!"

Casimiro looked up. "I have a psychic beacon! It's Terra!"

"Jump!"

The Strike Cruiser's Warp Engines violated reality and the Cruiser slipped into the Warp. Johnson, Keyes and _In Amber Clad_ were on their own.

Camp Currahee, Onyx

"Confirm time from last contact with Team Gladius." Kurt's voice was harsh. He knew most of his Spartans would die. He would be damned if they were going to die on Onyx while training.

"Six hours ago. They reported a glowing eye." Mendez said. "All the other teams are reporting in. While Gladius is missing, I suggest we shift Delta Company's training regime away from the planned survival exercises."

Kurt crossed his arms. "I agree. Inform Saber and Katana to keep an eye out and to not roam near any restricted areas."

Endless Summer appeared in the Holo-projector. "Sirs, there is a Covenant vessel exiting Slipspace."

"Damn, as if we didn't have enough problems!" Mendez spat.

The AI shifted to face the NCO. "Actually, it gets stranger. It is broadcasting Dr. Halsey's clearance code and Identification information."

"What? Halsey died on Reach!" The Lt. struggled not to shout.

"That may be. Shall I attempt to patch you into the communications?"

The SPARTAN-II nodded. A voice that Kurt never thought he would hear again crackled through the speakers. "Can you read me, this is Doctor Halsey!"

"This is Lt. Commander Kurt Ambrose, SPARTAN-051. We read you, Dr. Halsey. According to our sensors, you're on a bucket. Recommend you abandon ship."

"Affirmative. _LT. Commander Ambrose_" The slight emphasis on his name could not conceal her amusement.

On board the stolen Covenant vessel, Kelly-081 stirred. "I thought Kurt was gone."

"It seems someone up there likes him."

Warning icons and audio alarms sprang to life throughout the bridge. "Let's hope the same entity that 'likes' Kurt is on our side."

Dr. Halsey surely hoped so. "What are those things?"

Several dozen strange constructs were roaring through the atmosphere of Onyx and bearing down on the vessel. The drones opened fire. Their beams combined and effortlessly carved through the barely functioning shields. Kelly grabbed Dr. Halsey. The Spartan practically dragged the Doctor towards the Orbital Insertion Coffins.

"Good luck doctor."

Elizabeth tried to open her mouth to protest when the door hissed shut. She screamed the entire way down. The impact knocked the scientist unconscious. After a while, she was dragged from the Sangheli designed craft.

"Welcome back, Dr. Halsey."

"Mendez?"

"That's me, ma'am." He helped Halsey to her feet. All around the NCO were _dozens _of Spartans.

"Howâ€¦| how many Spartans are there?"

Kurt stepped forward. "There are a pair of SPARTAN-IIIs and at last count, nine hundred IIIs and six hundred waiting to be trained."

Halsey composed herself admirably. The retrieval team returned to Camp Currahee. They were greeted by the base's AI.

"We have a problem. I am detecting mass activation of devices in the northern quarantine regions."

Kelly was appraising a sniper rifle she selected. "More of what attacked us?"

"It is likely." The AI responded.

As they began to discuss this development, a young SPARTAN-III stumbled into the command center.

"Lt. Commander Ambroseâ€¦ Tom and Lucy are coming homeâ€¦" The child collapsed.

Mendez shook his head. "That can't happen. They died on Pegasi Delta!"

The veterans and scientist heard yelling in the recruit's area and ran into the room. One of the potential recruits was in the center of a panicked group. His eyes were burning with a cold flame.

"It has been a long time, Ambrose."

Kurt was taken aback. The boy was speaking with two voices. One was unnaturally deep and the other was a quiet feminine voice.

"Tom? Lucy?"

The possessed child snarled. "You have no right to use those names! We are coming home to repay you for Pegasi Delta. May Chaos claim your soul."

The child collapsed in a bleeding heap. Kurt knelt over the boy and closed his eyes. "Call for reinforcements. We're going to be hit hard."

Dr. Halsey nodded. "I'll send the message." The others rushed to recall the SPARTAN-IIIs from their field exercises.

Dr. Halsey sent a dutiful message. At the end, she added a single line: Send Spartans. Catherine breathed deep. She just might be able to save the Spartans from their fate after all.

Sydney Australia

Lord Hood stood at podium in front of a large map of Earth and Mars. The names of Imperial Guard regiments, UNSC marine and army units and Space Marine Chapters flashed around their area of deployment.

The overall command structure was clearer now. After the Anomaly collapsed, there had been a panic. Fortunately, the discipline of humanity's armies and Behar's revelation as the incarnation of the God-Emperor quickly restored order.

"Have the Space Marines declared their deployment zones?"

"We have, Lord Hood." Chapter Master Javier Romona of the Lamenters said with grim determination.

"The Ultramarines under Captain Ixxion will defend Europe and the Near East. The Iron Snakes will support operations in the Indian Subcontinent and the refugees. The Imperial Fists will deploy to Africa. Gabriel Angelos and the Blood Ravens will defend Australia and Antarctica. Captain Richard Chartes has pledged the Knight Brothers of Kadesh to the defense of Mars. My Chapter will deploy in the Western Hemisphere."

Chapter Master Khaba spoke next. "The Celestial Lions will deploy fully in Terminator Armor. Our goal will be to board Chaos Space Hulks or any Covenant Mobile Fortresses. We will then eliminate

them."

An officer spoke softly to Lord Hood. The Admiral shook his head.

"Chapter Master Khaba, we may need your Chapter elsewhere. If I may speak to you in private?"

The giant nodded. "Very well."

In a conference room, Lord Hood activated a device and a hologram of a planet appeared.

"Master Khaba, this is Onyx. It is the location of a secret UNSC base. We are training SPARTAN-IIIs. They will be the next generation of UNSC supersoldiers. They are all young war orphans. Six hours ago, we received an urgent transmission. Forerunner sentinels have been activating and shortly before the call for reinforcements, Chaos declared its intention to attack Onyx."

"How old are these Spartans?"

"On average, no older than twelve when they are recruited."

The Astarte was silent. "I will go to Onyx. I will ask for one thing in return."

"State your request."

"My chapter is on the brink. And now, my fellow Chapters are cut off. I want to be able to recruit future Space Marines from these Spartan-IIIs."

Lord Hood nodded. "Very well. You can recruit."

"Thank you, Lord Hood."

The Space Marine left. Khaba paid his respects to his fellow Astartes. Moments later, he was teleported to the orbiting Celestial Lion Battle Barge.

Almost immediately, he received a transmission from the UNSC. A Pelican containing several SPARTAN-IIs had landed on the Battle Barge.

"I'll greet them later. It is time to awaken the Ancients."

The Ancients were the Chapter's Dreadnoughts; the living relics of the Celestial Lions. Dreadnoughts were mortally wounded Space Marines that held on to a spark of life. They were interred in battle sarcophaguses so they could fight in the Emperor's name for all eternity.

The awakening rituals were sacred traditions of the Celestial Lions. When the Chapter was whole, they were rare occasions. Now, with the Celestial Lions entire Chapter numbering less than a company; they were forced to rely on the Ancients far more.

Master of the Forge Harak intoned the Litanies of Awakening as Khaba watched in stoic silence. Harak was Master of the Forge by virtue of

being the oldest surviving of the three Tech Marines left in the Chapter. His two subordinates, Ma'at and Walaj were much younger. Ma'at had only recently returned from Mars following his elevation from the Scout Company when the Chapter was rescued from Extinction by the Blood Ravens.

"**I have awoken.**"

"Ancient Illiam, I bid you welcome."

"**Where has the Emperor willed us to wage war?**"

Chapter Master Khaba took a deep breath. His former Captain's reaction would be telling.

"Ancient, we have received our orders directly from the Emperor Himself. There have been developments since we last called upon you for war."

"**The Emperor? He sits upon the Golden Throne. Speak, Brother Khaba. I wish to hear of these 'developments'." **

The Celestial Lion spoke at length. He told the Dreadnought of the recovery of the Chapter's Geneseed thanks to the Blood Ravens. Illiam probed the depths of Khaba's knowledge of the UNSC. The former captain of the Fourth Company was silent for a moment after Khaba completed his retelling of the tumultuous events.

"**Mm The survival of the Chapter is on Onyx. At last, back to war.**"

"Master of the Forge Harak and Techmarine Ma'at will continue the rituals. I must prepare the fleet for departure, Honored Ancient."

The SPARTANs were waiting for Chapter Master Khaba in the _Leonidas_'s Scriptorium. It was a perplexing place for the SPARTANs. The Celestial Lions were a military force, but the chamber they had been waiting in was more akin to a religious shrine.

"Welcome to the Battle-Barge _Leonidas_, Spartans. I am Chapter Master Khaba of the Celestial Lions."

"Thank you, sir." The SPARTANs had been briefed on the high rank of an Astartes Chapter Master. "I am Lt. Frederick-104. This is Petty Officer Second Class Linda-058 and Petty Officer Second Class William-043."

The Astartes nodded. "A UNSC facility has been threatened by the forces of Chaos. Imperial and UNSC command has ordered us to defend the world of Onyx. One Dr. Catherine Elizabeth Halsey made a personal request for SPARTANs to be deployed."

The SPARTANs sat impassively. Dr. Halsey was supposed to be dead. "If anyone would ask for SPARTANs specifically, it would be Dr. Halsey."

"Is she military?"

Lt. Frederick shook his head. "Not directly. Dr. Halsey is a

scientist. One of the leading ones for the SPARTAN project."

"Then she is a strategic asset to the continued survival of our species." A Chapter Serf stood in the doorway. "Yes, Adjunct Horowitz?"

"My lord, Battle Group _Leonidas_ reports they are ready for Warp Transit. The UNSC ships have docked with the Imperial Navy. We await your word."

"To Onyx! To Glory!"

Cleveland, Ohio

The Thunderhawk Gunships touched down in Cleveland's spaceport. A crowd of civilians had gathered to watch the arrival. In addition to the civilians, a dozen news agencies were present.

Yellow? That was the thought that came to most people's minds when they saw the Lamenters disembark. Local dignataries including the Mayor, Governor and several Regional Guard officers approached the warriors of the Imperium.

"Welcome to Cleveland! I am Bernard James. With me are Governor Amanda Hughes Police Commissioner John Garden and Colonel David Lasitter."

"I am Captain Romero Tarrin of the Lameneters 3rd Company. It is an honor to be received so warmly. Time conspires against us, unfortunately. We must act quickly. The shadow of the Covenant looms over us. Where shall we discuss regional security?"

Colonel Lasitter nodded. "There is a command center prepared."

"We shall follow in our Rhino. Your transports cannot carry us."

The group simply nodded. The Lamenters boarded their transport and followed the civilians and regional militia commanders. The media was disappointed in the lack of a sound bite from the powered armored soldiers.

Ruwan Ackerson leaned against a wall and lit a cigarette. "God damn, work is going to _suck._"

Fleet of Glorious Sublimation

"Who destroyed that Jiralhanae bucket! Was it a ship in this Fleet?"

"No Fleetmaster Hakre Vadamee! It was an unknown vessel!"

This was not a welcome development. The destruction of the Brute vessel nearly caused the Sangheli and Brutes to exchange fire. A rift had been growing between the two factions within the Covenant of late.

"We must do nothing to start the war."

Hakre Vadamee looked to High Charity. It was almost painful to imagine the Holy City engulfed by a Schism. The Sangheli was aware of

the sagging morale. The death of the Prophet of Regret hung over all. The Fleetmaster wondered how the High Council was proceeding.

High Charity

The High Prophet of Truth sat at the center of the assembly. As ever, the Prophet of Mercy was at his right side. Tartarus was a step below the surviving Hierarchs. The Jiralhanae Chieftains had filed into the chamber. Tartarus nodded to his favored lieutenants. Brackitus, Joratus and Trekatus were the most notable.

"Brothers! The Hierarchs!" Tartarus boomed.

"Chieftains, we are all in mourning over the death of the Prophet of Regret. The failure of the Elites cannot be ignored. As you all know, they have been gathering weapons and meeting in secret. They have held you back for too long. _No Longer_."

The Brutes knew that the Prophets were giving them more power. Deception's proclamation had been a moment of glory. This had the potential to eclipse even that exalted occurrence.

"It is with a heavy heart that I pronounce judgment. The Covenant must be protected. It must be saved from itself. The Sangheli, all of them, are Heretics. Cast them down."

Tartarus looked to the Hierarchs. He received permission to speak.

"Brothers! We will save the Covenant! Brackitus, you have been selected to secure the surface of Halo alongside my own forces! Joratus, your experience with naval combat makes you ideal to cleanse the Void of the Elites. Trekatus, we have lost contact with the colony world B5-2E and other installations near the Tempest. The Prophets have gifted you with the Fleet of Earnest Adulation. Investigate the disappearance."

The Chieftains received their orders. Joratus and Trekatus bowed and were permitted by the Prophets to leave. Tartarus walked down the steps.

"Chieftain Brackitus, how soon can your forces deploy?"

"As soon as you give the order, Chieftain of the Jiralhanae."

Tartarus nodded. "Excellent. I know you have many soldiers fighting the humans."

"The youngest, Chieftain. The forces I have here are the veterans of my forces."

"Ready your forces. We will be 'escorting' the Sangheli Councilors to view the Library."

Brackitus thumped his chest. It was time to cut the cancer of heresy from the Covenant.

Depths of Installation 05

Pain wracked Kxon Rtau's body. The pain of the flesh paled next to the pain of the mind. He struggled, but found himself restrained.

"**Welcome brothers to this grave**." An unnatural voice filled the chamber. The source was a monstrous creature of rotting flesh. It stretched throughout the chamber. A growth that resembled a head dominated the Arbiter's sight. The creature was clearly of Flood Origin. _Gravemind_. The world pierced the Arbiter's thoughts like a blade. This creature was ancient and dangerous. Its very presence was a threat to not only the Covenant, but the Galaxy as a whole. He had to free himself from the creature and escape. His brother Sangheli must be warned.

Kxon struggled for his Plasma Sword.

"I really don't think you should piss this thing off." It was a human voice!

The Sangheli turned his head and glared at the human.

"DEMON! I should destroy you for all that you have done."

"Try to destroy him _after_ we get away from this thing!" A feminine voice escaped from the demon's armor.

"You destroyed the Sacred Ring!"

"Listen, Halo isn't a divine instrument! It's a _weapon!_" The Demon continued as calm as if he were discussing weapon selection. All the while, the Gravemind watched the exchanged with amused detachment.

"And what would your species know of divinity?" There was doubt in the Sangheli's voice that only Kxon failed to hear.

The Gravemind eventually grew tired of the childish bickering.

"**Enough. I have listened through rock and metal and time. Now I shall speak and you shall **_**listen**_**.**"

"**This one is of nerve and metal and has his mind concluded.**" The Flood Gravemind leaned in close to Master Chief.

"**This one is of flesh and faith and is the more **_**deluded**_**.**"
**The Arbiter recoiled as the Flood being turned its dread attention to him.

"**Arbiter!**" Do not listen to the creature! You must ensure the Great Journey!" K'xon went slack mandible upon hearing the Prophet of Regret's voice. In an image that would forever be burned into his memory, the Arbiter saw the Hierarch subsumed into the enormous Flood being. No being deserved to be consumed by the Flood.

"Great Journey? Don't be ridiculous! Reclaimer, you have to secure the Index to initiate Containment Protocol!" The Monitor of Installation 05, 2401 Penitent Tangent almost sounded excited. There was something off about his tone to the Arbiter and Master Chief's military ears. Cortana recognized what was happening to Penitent Tangent. The Forerunner AI was rampant.

This one's Great Journey and this one's Containment are the same. The *San 'Shyuum promised you escape from a doomed universe and the Thirsting Gods. There is no salvation on this Ring. Those who built it knew what they wrought. Do not ignore the truth of the Array. Only a fool is ignorant the blade at his neck!*****

The Arbiter looked away from the Gravemind. It was one thing to hear a perversion of Nature and a mockery of the cycle of Life and Death denounce the very basis of your faith; _of your existence_. It was another thing entirely for the creature to be _right_. In the distance, Kxon swore he saw Sesa Refumee watching the grim procession with a look of utter defeat. In that moment, Kxon felt his will return. The Sangheli could not fall.

***Time flees, but the key has not yet turned.**"

The Gravemind fell silent for a moment.

"Chief, I think I'm detecting some kind of energy dissipating from the Gravemind."

"What kind of energy? He does have a Monitor captured. Are you sure that isn't the source?"

"No, I've isolated the Monitor's emissions. My memory has a frame of reference for Forerunner AI energy signatures. This is somethingâ€¦ I don't know. I can't describe it. The only thing that comes close is the data from the demon that attacked Cairo Station before the Imperium arrived."

"The Gravemind has a connection to the Warp?"

"Iâ€¦ I don't know. It's possible, but I don't have a frame of reference."

The Gravemind snapped out of his seeming reverie.

Ahâ€¦ We were born enemies, but this Ring shall make us brothers.

The Arbiter and Master Chief were more unnerved by the victorious tone in the enormous Flood Form's voice.

***The Gate must remain unlatched.**"

Master Chief was pulled closer to the Gravemind. It was an unnerving experience, even for the Spartan.

***You will search one likely spot.**"

Next, the Gravemind's attentions turned to the Arbiter. "***And you will search the other.**"

John recognized the sensation from his time on Alpha Halo. There was a feeling of being tugged from the inside and then enveloped in light. In an instant, the Gravemind had sent them to the locations where the Index was likely to be located.

As its new agents undoubtedly reached their destinations, the Gravemind viewed the Ring through the eyes of his Children. They

would soon be free of their prison.

The Flood would save this Galaxy from Stagnation and the Thirsting Gods in spite of the flawed inhabitants after all.

High Charity, Council Chambers

"_Faithful _members of the Covenant, I bid you fair tidings. Many of you, your ancestors and your families, have prayed for proof of the Great Journey. **I bring it to you now!**"

The Prophet of Truth held the Index aloft. "Behold, the Sacred Icon. The key of the Great Journey!"

The Hierarch basked in the roar of the faithful. There could be no doubt now. Yes, when the Covenant followed the Forerunners into glory by lighting the Halo Arrays, Truth would be elevated above all others.

"_There are those who said this day would never come_! What are they to say _now_?"

In the rear of the ornate and holy chamber, the Uggnoy Hulca was watching one of his brethren operate a holocamera. He was honored to be allowed into the chamber. This was a really good moment for the Covenant. But did it have to take so long? Hulca was hungry and the Needler the Jiralhanae were forcing him to carry was really heavy.

The Elites never made them carry a heavy weapon when on guard duty like this. The Elites never threatened to eat Hulca when he was on guard duty for 'laxity' either. A curious thought struck Hulca, just where were the Sangheli anyway? Why were the Brutes guarding the Prophets? Something was wrong. Hulca couldn't put his finger on it.

He sighed as he wished for a trip to the food nipple. A flash of light and a metallic crunch grabbed his attention. The Uggnoy turned around slowly. Hulca had a really, really bad feeling about this. It was the Demon! There was no mistaking it! It wore Green Armor and had no eyes! Instead it had a shiny orange face. Animalistic terror ripped into Hulca's soul.

"Boo."

John deftly caught the Needler as the Grunt fled screaming in the opposite direction.

"You enjoyed that didn't you?" Cortana's voice was coy.

"Maybe a little." Master Chief said as he noted the layout of the chamber. The panicked Grunt had set off a chain reaction. Every Uggnoy, armed or no, was fleeing the Chamber. The only Covenant aliens left in the Chamber were two Prophets and half a dozen Brutes.

The Prophet of Truth quivered with rage as he saw _it_. The beast that had undone so much of his plans was standing in this holy place. The Human abomination that had delayed his _ascension._

"_KILL THE DEMON!_"_

The Brutes opened fire with modified Plasma Rifles and an oversized pistol that John hadn't seen before. The two Brutes that had placed themselves between Sierra-117 and the Prophets shouted orders to the lesser Jiralhanae.

"Tartarus, Brackitus! We must relocate." The Prophet of Truth's voice was cold and surgically precise. His sudden change in demeanor was unsettling to Brackitus.

Tartarus nodded and the Gravity lift activated. In an instant, the Prophets and Brute Chieftains were gone.

Master Chief rolled behind a holograph projector. The sound of the spike rounds impaling the projector like a rivet gun.

In a blur, he sprang to his feet and moved to a more solid piece of cover firing as he advanced. The Needler could do respectable damage to lighter infantry like human marines or Grunts. Unfortunately, Jiralhanae were naturally resilient.

Suddenly, a tactical opening presented itself. Two of the Brutes advanced very close to each other. Chief removed, armed and threw his last frag grenade in a single fluid motion. The explosion tore apart the two Brutes. A warning flashed on Chief's HUD that his shields had taken a few hits. One of the Brutes charged and abandoned all sense of tactics. It simply wanted to get close and tear the SPARTAN apart. The Needler had regenerated, and Chief pumped a full salvo into the charging Brute. At such short range, there was no way for the Jiralhanae to fool the limited tracking programming in the shards.

There was an explosion of pink crystal intermixed with pink mist of shredded flesh.

John grabbed the modified plasma rifle in one hand as the Needler was regenerating. A roar of utter despair filled the chamber. The last surviving Brute went mad with grief. It cast aside its weapons and reason. The Jiralhanae blindly barreled towards the Spartan. Needler shots were hardly noticed. Only repeated overcharged plasma blasts caused pain in the berserk. The Brute finally collapses when a single Needle pierces its eye and exploded.

"Chief, get to the Gravity Lift. We have to catch up with Truth!"

John reached the lift. "You're going to have to leave me here. I'll enter the network and track Truth. Slow him down a bit."

"What about Covenant countermeasures?"

Was there concern in his voice? Cortana was thankful she could easily hide her emotions.

"There isn't an AI the Covenant has made that could even make me break a sweat."

Master Chief entered the lift column. Cortana watched John slide out of sight.

"Your luck better hold, Spartanâ€¦"

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19. Chapter 19: Chains rises from the grave!

Manas, Kyrgyzstan, Earth

General Yahja Zahedi of the UNSC Army sat at his desk as the cadre of Imperial Guard and other UNSC officials entered the makeshift office. The UNSC marines and army officers had a continuity of appearance. The Imperial Guard officials, on the other hand, wore a variety of uniforms and side arms.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, we have a lot of work to do and almost no time to do it in. The Covenant and Chaos are coming. Ideally, I'd spend at least a month unifying our audio communications _codes_. Unfortunately, we have to prepare as if our enemies are going to launch their attack as soon as we finish this meeting."

Colonel Ka'a of the Imperial Guard's 819th Hi'it Regulars spoke next. "What area should we focus on in our short time?"

General Zahedi still had trouble wrapping his head around the female only regiments. His own command had numerous female soldiers, but there were no women-only platoons much less companies or battalions.

"Covenant visual identification isn't going to be a problem. My biggest concern is the vehicles of Chaos. They routinely scavenge and steal from the Imperium do they not?"

"The faithless traitors routinely defile the blessed vehicles of the Imperium."

Yahja took a deep breath. "Then we've got a lot of work to do on IFF and visual identification. Ladies and Gentlemen, I hope you like coffee."

_Primarch's Vengeance _in Warp Transit

Captain Thomas of the Imperial Fists conversed with Captain Gregori and Librarian Casmiro on the bridge of the Strike Cruiser.

"I assure you brothers, the strands of fate are still favorable."

Warin nodded respectfully. "Be that as it may, Chief Librarian, I do not like that we were forced to abandon loyal soldiers of the Imperium and UNSC on Halo. I am alsoâ€¦ curious as to why you did not remain with Commander Keyes and Sergeant Johnson. Their success could have been increased substantially by your presence."

"Do not presume to judge me from the high ground of hindsight, Son of Dorn. The Covenant was bringing overwhelming firepower to bear down upon us. My visions show that they will survive and be instrumental in coming events. Destiny will protect them."

"Of course. Status on our journey through the Warp?"

Captain Gregori stood next his Chief Librarian subtly demonstrating his support. "The warp Currents are favorable. We should be arriving at Holy Terra in two hours."

"Thank you, Chief Librarian Casmiro and Captain Gregori. If you will excuse me."

Captain Thomas left the bridge and returned to his own battle-brothers. The Imperial Fists were attending to their weapons.

"Brother Captain, what is our situation?" Ioannes asked as he signed the Aquilla.

The Captain nodded at his young battle-brother. "Chief Librarian Casmiro reports that the Warp Currents and portents are favorable for the soldiers who remained on Halo."

Brother Rhys completed the Rites of Repair on his personal bolter. "Did he mention any specifics about the Spartan?"

"Casimiro offered no details on the Master Chief. He is a fine soldier. We must have confidence in his abilities. He survived the first Halo with only the Machine Spirit Cortana and his natural talents for war to aid him."

There was a pause. Warin had not fought at Master Chief's side much, but he found himself respecting the Spartan for his past glories. "I find myself wishing the Imperium had discovered the UNSC decades ago. He would have been an incredible Imperial Fist."

The _Leonidas_ in Warp Transit

The Spartans entered the cavernous briefing room. Fred constantly found his gaze returning to the tapestries, statues and battle standards placed around the chamber. This area was as much a shrine as a military facility.

Chapter Master Khaba was standing at the head of a massive marble table carved into the heraldic symbol of the Celestial Lions. The Spartans counted ninety Celestial Lions. According to the briefing material, there should be ninety-six Lions.

"Welcome Spartans. We shall begin when Master of the Forge Harak and our Tech Marines arrive with the Ancients."

"Of course, Chapter Master Khaba."

Brother Gerard leaned close to the members of his squad. "What do you make of these Spartans?"

Sergeant Harun cast a stern glance at his battle-brothers. "They are steadfast warriors. They will be an integral part of our victory on Onyx."

Linda activated the Spartan's communication gear. "The Space Marines don't seem to know what to make of us."

"We don't know what to make of them. We will find out on Onyx."

A roar filled the room and through the main entrance strode the remaining Celestial Lions. Master of the Forge Harak wore armor so immaculately cared for that it appeared as if it never had seen combat. A gaggle of acolytes shadowed Harak.

"Behold, the Ancients, the living history of our Chapter!" Harak bellowed in a voice that was deep even by the standards of the Astartes.

The pronouncement caught the Spartans' attention and they turned their attention to the Techmarines. Their shift was a subtle thing. An outside observer would have simply seen the assembled super soldiers standing as impassive as the statues that lined the walls of the chamber.

A number of giant war machines strode forth. Their footfalls were heavy with the weight of history. Shock played unseen across the faces of the assembled Spartans. The Celestial Lion walkers had more weaponry and likely more armor than a Scorpion Tank.

"**The Chapter's Past has awoken to secure its future!**" A voice boomed from one of the Dreadnoughts.

Chapter Master Khaba, and all the Celestial Lions, took heart at the sight of the honored dead who refused to end their service to the Emperor.

"My brothers and our honorable allies! The forces of the Great Enemy seek to despoil the world of Onyx. They shall fail. In six hours, we shall rendezvous with the UNSC Battlegroup Stalingrad. The Imperium has transferred an Astropath and the 9th Andraste Templars from the Colony Vessel Veritas Terra to Battlegroup Stalingrad. We are Humanity's Bulwark against a cruel and uncaring galaxy! Our shield and our sword shall never falter. Though we stand apart from humanity, we stand beside them! No tragedy, no overwhelming odds will prevent us from our duty!"

The souls of the assembled Space Marines stirred. They felt the call to war in their very blood. And as one, they pledged to answer.

Installation 05

N'tho Sraomee watched the humans as they crept out of the Shadow transport bus. J'han Sirmee had noticed a Jiralhanae vehicle patrolling the ridge ahead of them. Almost immediately, the humans disembarked. The Elites were surprised by the reasoning.

"The Shadow has too high a profile. If they've got a Wraith, we'd be deep fried." Sergeant Kolak grunted as he checked the charge on his lasgun.

Corporal Magalan took a covering position on the opposite side of the Sangheli Transport. "Anyone recognize that vehicle?"

"That is a Type 52 Infantry Support Vehicle. They are as close to a worthy foe as the Jiralhanae can be."

"I've seen them once before, when we retook Almora." Sgt. Keller nodded. He rolled over and flashed a signal. Private Kenyon snuck across the broken ground.

"Yes, sir?"

"Sgt. Kolak says that you are an artist when it comes to rigging up IEDs."

"I learned quick. Grew up gang fighting against heretics. What do you want me to do?"

The Sergeant smiled. "I need you to rig up a bomb capable of ripping that Brute vehicle apart."

The young Cadian cast a quick glance across his cover. "Ok. This won't be too bad. I'll need a few krak grenades though."

The Elites exchanged a few harsh grunts. Ross smirked at the alien's confusion. T'kyn Nakanee suddenly looked as if he was a school child straining to copy down an important part of a lesson. The guardsmen handed over a clutch of krak grenades to the self-taught explosives expert. Kenyon proceeded to wire together his concoction.

J'han spoke in the silent Sangheli battle language. "Resourceful, these humans."

Nakanee appeared completely oblivious to the subtle ticks of his comrade. "Quite, the youngest among them is skilled with explosives."

N'tho focused on the possible approaches. "As skilled as you perhaps."

J'han was not nearly as subtle as his comrades. One of his movements was picked up by the humans. "A Brute must have struck your head in that ambush for such a thought to even be considered."

"Alright, I've got it finished!" The enthusiasm in the human warrior's voice was amusing to the Sangheli.

Kolak nodded towards his counterpart. "So, what is the bait?"

"How about the mortars?" Corporal Wallace suggested as he instinctively minimized his profile as a large Brute with a banner crested the hill.

"Won't that drive them back to a more defensible position?" Nai Vacan asked as he shifted the weight of the vox around.

J'han snapped his mandibles. "The Jiralhanae horde has no such sense. They would simply charge ahead in their foolish desire to destroy their attackers."

"So, they are basically hairy Orks then?" Trooper Oland asked.

N'tho cast a glance at his fellow Sangheli. "Ork?"

"Old enemy." Maljan said as he cradled the Plasma gun.

Sgt. Kolak made a harsh gesture. "Enough nostalgia. Get ready to put some mortar rounds on the enemy strong point as soon as Kenyon has his IED placed."

Corporal Wallace was farthest forward. He flashed a signal for Kenyon to advance. It took four tense minutes for the young Cadian to place the explosive.

"Alright, it's set. Give me my mortar."

Sgt. Keller grinned broadly at the Sangheli. "Let's blow up some Bravo Kilos."

The thud of the human mortar was followed swiftly by a dull explosion at the top of ridge and roars of indignation by the Brutes. The Infantry Support Vehicle gave a hearty growl as it barreled towards the human position like an enraged animal.

"Boom goes the Dynamite!" The shout was followed by a click and a roll of thunder. The Brute vehicle cart-wheeled forward before hitting a large rock with a crunch that was felt as much as heard.

"Take the hill!" Sergeant Kolak boomed as he scythed a Brute that was clawing its way from the wreckage. As one, the Sangheli and humans charged.

High Charity

Brackitus sat above the throng of lesser Jiralhanae pleading for his attention. The 'King of Hybris' reveled in his new found power as the right hand of the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae and favored of the Hierarchs themselves.

"Ricat, have you confirmed the report from Shipmistress Chur'R-Vat?"

"The last report we received was that the Gregarious Supplication had ignored orders and entered the Vortex claiming that it had detected human transmissions."

"Those fool Kig-Yar!" Brackitus roared as he knocked a goblet across the room. "Do they believe my orders are mere suggestions? They were to rendezvous with the Thirty ninth fleet of Wondrous Instigation! I pray to the Forerunners that you have some news that will not have me cursing the incompetence of those under my command."

Ricat stood straighter and purged any sense of fear or weakness from his features. "Your soldiers are in position. They await only your command the blessing of the Hierarchs to cleanse our sacred Covenant of the taint of the Elite's heresy."

Of course, his packmates were proper warriors. Only the Jiralhanae were steadfast and motivated enough to carry out the will of the Prophets.

"Excellent. You are all dismissed." Ricat pounded his chest at the realization of the order. Some of the lesser Chieftains growled at the causal nature of how they were ignored.

All debate was drowned out by the quiet hum of Brackitus' gravity hammer.

The assembled minor chieftains filed out of the chamber. Most accepted the hierarchy, but there was undeniable reluctance by some of the Jiralhanae.

Brackitus nodded as his son was the final Jiralhanae to exit the council assembly. He flicked a switch on his communicator. With due haste, he knelt before the holographic display of the Hierarchs and Tartarus his over-chieftain.

"Holy Prophets and honorable Chieftain. You commanded me to update you upon my soldiers' reaching their assigned locations. They are ready."

Truth nearly appeared to be a statue. "Excellent. Tartarus has just informed us that his own preparations have been completed. The Jiralhanae are our instruments and they have our blessings."

The link was severed without ceremony. The hologram of the silver-maned Chieftain of the Jiralhanae nodded to Brackitus. "The future of the Covenant is in our hands. We must not fail the Hierarchs."

"We are Jiralhanae, Chieftain."

Tartarus pounded violently on his chest. "That we are! Cleanse High Charity. It must be purified of the taint the Elites!"

"What of the Demon, Tartarus?"

"Our forces are currently herding him into the Sangheli quarter. The Sangheli and the Demon shall crash against each other and weaken. We will preserve many of our packmates in this action."

Brackitus flashed a predatory grin. "Excellent, High Chieftain."

The Chieftain of the Jiralhanae savored the coming order like the finest wine. "Help me free our people from the domination of the Sangheli."

"As you command, Tartarus."

The link was closed and Brackitus hefted his weapons and emerged from the chamber. The lesser Chieftains and Brackitus's family members stared in rapt attention.

The Gravity Hammer was lifted and the Brutes roared at the coming victory.

Bern, Switzerland

The convoy of Trojan Support vehicles and Warthog APCs crossed the Nydeggbäck Bridge into the Old City. Bern, though a major city for the region, was deemed to have a much lower strategic value than its neighbor Geneva. Thus, only a single Imperial Guard Regiment had been tasked to support the UNSC army force defending the city.

The Chimeras, Griffons and Hellhounds followed closely behind the

supply convoy. Colonel Elsa Gryta took a deep breath and pulled her heavy overcoat in tight as she stood in the open hatch of the lead Chimera. The positioning of the 4th Ersawi baffled her. Ersawi was a temperate agriworld dotted with countless lakes. Her guards-women weren't used to the cold, thin mountain air.

At least there are rivers. The colonel sighed as she entered the interior of the Chimera transport.

"How soon can we arrive at the defense center?"

The Lieutenant nodded crisply. "Two minutes, ma'am. Would you like me to patch you through on the Vox?"

"I spoke to him as soon as the transport touched down earlier today and again when the Regiment was underway. We can wait two minutes to speak again."

"Very well, ma'am."

The Command Chimera was waved through several security checkpoints before reaching the city's defense command center. Colonel Gryta overheard one of her soldiers scoffing at a tank trying to obscure itself in a dugout. _It's too tall_. Elsa found a strange comraderie with the awkward vehicle. They were both out of place and in a situation neither was ideally suited for.

Elsa took a deep breath as the Chimera came to a halt. She would defend any inch of Holy Terra to her last breath. However, she had selfishly wished to be deployed to the region known as "Canada". She had studied the maps. There were thousands of lakes, streams and rivers. It was almost like home.

The Colonel brushed a graying strand of hair from her face and marched down the descending ramp. A pair of UNSC soldiers was waiting to greet her. They saluted sharply and Colonel Gryta returned the gesture.

"Ma'am, welcome to Bern."

Gryta glanced over the soldiers and quickly recalled the universal rank system the UNSC used.

"Thank you, Sergeant. Colonel Klein is expecting me."

"Aye, Colonel Gryta. If you will follow us?" The young Sergeant motioned towards the old building. The inside was blessedly heated and the elevator ride smooth.

I don't like the fact that we are going up. Gryta thought glumly.

Colonel Klein looked up from his computer and nodded. "My god, it is good to see your Regiment, Colonel."

Gryta accepted the outstretched hand and shook it. The enthusiasm in the colonel's voice was evident. "The 4th Ersawi is honored to serve alongside your forces."

Klein smiled and motioned for Gryta to take a seat. "I assume you

have read the briefings on possible enemy disposition?"

Gryta nodded. "I have. The Covenant is likely going to focus on Geneva due to the United Earth Government Parliament. The high level of conflict will likely draw several Chaos Warbands. We'll likely face roving Kig-Yar or _Traitors_ looking for plunder."

"That is my assessment. I fought Kig-Yar on Skopje. Does your Regiment have an experience against the Forces of Chaos?"

"Not against Chaos." There was true fear in her voice. Klein could understand on an intellectual level. He had heard the reports of the maddened Chaos warriors still being rooted out from around the Mombasa Ruins. It was hard to believe that nearly an entire UNSC battalion had given themselves over to what was basically the devil.

Gryta looked up as her engrained discipline reasserted itself. "We have fought rebels though. The equipment, at least the non-tainted equipment, will be familiar to my guardswomen."

"Very well." The dark haired colonel tapped a few keys and a map appeared in his desk. "All the bridges are labeled. My combat engineers and the Adept Mechanics are wiring them to blow if we can't hold them."

Elsa gazed at the map noting where her Griffons would be best positioned. "The _Adeptus Mechanicus_ are very thorough."

"I'm sure they are. They've been working for the past day trying to get as much of the city fortified as possible."

Elsa steepled her fingers and rested them on her chin. "By the Throne, I'd want at least a week to fortify this place enough to slow down an advancing enemy."

The UNSC colonel slumped in his chair. Gryta was growing concerned with the UNSC Colonel. "I concur. Unfortunately, we don't have that luxury. My aides have created several maps to show your troopers the fastest routes to the shelters."

Colonel Klein did not hear or chose to ignore the incredulous tone in Elsa's voice. "We'll need them when the bombardments start. I fear it will take some time for the Navy to gain orbital superiority."

"Of course. Now, let's get out of this death trap of an office and into a proper bunker. If the techies don't have a proper command center set up by now, I'm going to find an excuse to shoot someone."

Elsa smiled as a bit of hope for Klein's abilities returned. "The Guard has commissars for that."

"Colonel Gryta, did you descend from the heavens?"

Basilica of the Word onboard the _Blasphemy of Thorns_

Eliphas the Inheritor watched as his Host returned to their private chambers to prepare their blessed armaments and contemplate their duty to the Dark Gods. His chosen agents stood at the proper

distance.

"You have questions, my acolytes."

Eliphas strode down the Dias and towards the bowels of the _Blasphemy of Thorns_.

Coryphaeus Aeolus fell in behind his Daemonic Master. "Why did you choose the target, my lord? Rome is the center of false worship and a site with much significance."

Eliphas sneered. "Leylines, my Coryphaeus. The target rests on leylines of ancient power. Our Nexus is in Europe. There are several others throughout the world. The Primarch will target the core Nexus and other, lesser, hosts will secure the others."

Iulianus stopped in his tracks. The realization of the Primarch and his Apostle's plans were staggering.

The First Acolyte laughed behind his ornate helmet. "Glorious is it not?"

The beauty of it all enraptured the Coryphaeus. Eliphas laughed darkly. "Your faith is a wondrous thing my Coryphaeus. Even Lorgar has taken note of it. Our Glorious Primarch has decreed that your personally selected unit shall be amongst the Legion's Vanguard. Go, select the most faithful and merciless warriors under your command."

"I will collect the Warriors and elevate them to the Ranks of the Anointed! By your leave, Holy Apostle!"

Eliphas placed a clawed hand on his Coryphaeus's shoulder. The Daemon Prince's paw enveloped the Tactical Dreadnought Armor's pauldron. "Go with the blessings of the Dark Gods."

Kentarus shook his head as the Terminator Champion left the room. "The faith of a True Believer is glorious."

Eliphas walked to an altar and fire followed his motion. "It is an example of us all. Faith is the true strength of our Legion. Never forget that my brothers."

Sydney, Australia

"They treat that thing like it's an honored guest!"

The mug slammed on table as a chorus of affirmatives were grunted by the other patrons.

"The Elites genocide us for decades and then one day they show up and ask for a truce like we're squabbling children?" The second patron downed a second drink.

A third patron spun a knife in the palm of his hand. "It's an insult to the billions of humans that monster's kind murdered!"

"Damn right! They've probably got him in some fancy hotel or something while we're working to the bone trying to stop the Covenant." A new voice practically shouted.

"I'll find out where's his at." The first voice growled. "Wait for my call."

There was a clinking of glasses and the conspirators filed out of the bar. The knife wielding patron was the last to stumble out of the seedy pub.

He slinked into an alley way. He pulled a wafer-thin device from the inside of his jacket. "Vulkan's Fire."

There was a click. "What have you uncovered?"

"My lady, you were correct. There is a conspiracy against the alien."

"You don't sound worried."

The agent chuckled as he wore the shadows as a cloak. "It's a few drunken officers."

"If it was up to me, I'd help them kill the xenos. However, we can't afford to endanger the truce with the Sangheli at this time."

"What are your orders, Inquisitor?"

"Play your role. Hefran will trail them."

"I'll transmit their pics." His voice was sour.

"Chirurgeon Quin will have some painkillers for you."

The connection was severed and Inquisitor Acelia rose from her seat. The computer banks in front of her were buzzing with an influx of information. Only a small portion was the pictures of the minor malcontents.

Sister Helena opened the door. "Inquisitor, a Commander Kwan from the Office of Naval Intelligence to see you."

"Send him in."

Commander Kwan was unsure of how to greet the Inquisitor. So, he settled on the most neutral of greetings. "Thank you for seeing me, Inquisitor."

He bowed slightly and Acelia nodded in return. "You are welcome. How may the Most Holy Inquisition aid you?"

"Is this room secure?"

Acelia smiled warmly. That seemed to placate the ONI officer. "Even against psychics?"

"Inquisitor Lord Agmar had his personal Psyker sweep this room. We have potent wards in place."

"Excellent." The ONI man slid a dataslate across the table.

Acelia removed it gracefully. Her regal features did not reveal any reaction to the contents. "How sure are you of this information?"

"Unfortunately, we have never been able to penetrate deeply into the complex. The technology is as far above anything we've ever encountered as the Imperium is above the Covenant."

Acelia placed the dataslate down. "You were wise to bring this to me. This most certainly falls under the purview of the Ordo Xenos."

"Doctor Tzaâ€¦"

"The _Emperor_." The young Inquisitor cut off the ONI operative sharply.

"The 'Emperor' said as much. What resources would need to be seconded to secure the complex?"

Acelia chewed on her lip for a moment. "We would need a large force including Space Marines and Spartans. With the Great Enemy and the Covenant moving against us, we cannot spare the necessary numbers."

"We suspected as much. But this complexâ€¦"

"Is best not to be spoken of lightly. Is there anything else, Commander Kwan?"

"There will be an intelligence briefing in six hours. All available Inquisitors are requested to attend."

"I will be there."

Kwan nodded politely and left Acelia to stare grimly at the dataslate.

High Charity

Resistance should not be this light. Master Chief had been keeping out of the main thoroughfares during his hunt for the Prophet of Regret. John reached maintenance hatch and Cortana appeared in a projector.

"Chief, something's going on. Something really big. I'm getting reports that Brutes and Sangheli are mobilizing all across the Station."

"Joint operations? Am I being herded?"

"Noâ€¦ Oh my godâ€¦ The Covenant Fleetâ€¦ _It's firing on each other._"

The Spartan was almost struck dumb. "Say again, Cortana."

"It's like Ragnarok up there. Elite and Brute controlled ships are engaging each otherâ€¦ Wait one."

The Master Chief took cover out of line of sight from the

door.

"Confirmed, the Brutes are moving their troops into Sangheli controlled sections of High Charity."

The charge would hold; there was no danger of running out of energy for the Plasma rifle.

"Are we closing in on the target?"

"The Prophet of Regret is heading for a location in Brute Controlled sectors. I'm activating a waypoint for your HUD. I'll remain in the city's computer grid for the time being. It'll help me slow and track Regret."

John didn't like leaving Cortana in the system like that. Spartans didn't leave behind their comrades. The Covenant did possess AI, but they weren't as inventive as UNSC AI. None of them were Cortana, but Cortana wasn't in a UNSC system. The Covenant had greater resources.

"Get going, Master Chief. We don't have time to discuss my presence in the system."

"Reading my mind?"

"I'm not _that _bored Spartan."

"I don't know how you'll survive without those cheesy action movies."

"Oohâ€¦ you've gotten cheeky since the Imperium showed upâ€¦"

"You know me. Life of the party. Keep me updated on Regret's movements."

The Spartan emerged into a thoroughfare. John advanced quickly keeping to alcoves and out of sight. He was in a section of the Covenant Holy city that was obviously residential. The Master Chief recognized the nature of the city even though it belonged to creatures as different from him as birds were from wolves.

It was the legacy of the Forerunners. The Covenant scavenged all they could from the long dead former masters of the Galaxy. Through trial and error the myriad races of the Covenant had learned to use the amazing technologies of the ancients.

Humanity on the other hand seemed to have an instinctive connection with the Forerunners. Sierra-117 had experienced the uncanny understanding several times. _On Halo_. It was unsettling how his existence was beginning to be defined by that singular war. He had fought many wars. Eridanus Secundus, Reach, Chi Cheti, the _Unyielding Hierophantâ€¦|_

There was a time and a place to remember past battles. An Alien residential area was not one of them. After pushing deeper into High Charity, John made a startling discovery. It was burning. He pressed tightly against a fallen wall and scanned over the cackling flames. Hundreds of Uggnoy were charging, screaming squeaking war cries at a herd of Kig-Yar. The diminutive aliens were fighting with a hate that

John had never seen them direct at anything.

"Chief, Regret has stopped. Location confirmed as a temple in section designated A-21. According to records, it is a Prophet exclusive section."

"Acknowledged Cortana." John slipped past the bestial melee. He timed his movements to the thuds of the Fuel Rod Cannons of the Grunts. An anti-grav bridge activated and slid effortlessly from the residential section.

The holographic form of Cortana greeted him on the other side. "Be advised Chief, fighting is intensifying across the city."

"Roger."

Cortana smiled as her form shimmered and disappeared. Chief stepped off the bridge and took up a less exposed position. His foresight is rewarded when a group of Kig-Yar and a Brute storm into the open.

"The Sangheli have inflamed the Uggnoy to acts of base Heresy! Forward, for the Hierarchs!"

The Brute bellowed as he kicked a reluctant Jackal forward.

Last grenade. Chief lobbs the plasma grenade into the mass of Covenant soldiery. The panicked squawking of the Kig-yar is quickly drowned out by the dull thud of the exploding grenade. A full third of the formation was eliminated.

A frag would have wiped them all out. Chief growled as he leapt out of cover. The Brute had to be eliminated first. His domineering presence was all that was holding the small Covenant force together.

The Spartan was firing his plasma rifle before the Brute even had a chance to recover from being staggered. John's sudden assault never gave the Brute any chance. Plasma bolts seared steaming holes into the alien's chest. It fell screaming curses and gasping for air that would never reach its ruined lungs.

The Jackals fled clutching their heads and screaming in terror. Sierra-117 quickly secured their ammo and continued towards Regret's location. "Cortana, update on Regret's position."

"Unchanged. I've confirmed he has sent the highest ranking Brute to the surface of Halo."

"We're going to have to hope that Elite can stop him then."

"I don't like it anymore thanâ€¦ Oh noâ€¦"

"What?"

"Slipspace rupture forming _inside_ High Charity! It's _In Amber Clad!_" Cortana gasped.

There was a tear in the fabric of reality and the human ship roared

overhead. The passing of the UNSC frigate shook Master Chief to his very core. The jump drives of the UNSC were never that accurate. He steadied himself as the frigate headed deeper into High Charity

.

"No one is responding. They are deploying Pelicans!"

Master Chief continued to advance through the burning City.

"Flood!" The Flood are deploying throughout the city. It used us. We were nothing more than a diversion to allow the Gravemind to escape Halo." The dread was evident in every syllable Cortana uttered

The Flood were loose upon the Galaxy once more. They had access to Slipspace travel and billions of potential hosts. The Milky Way was poised to once again drown in Gravemind's wrath.

The Crimson Revenant, formerly the Pious Inquisitor

Richard the Bloody Handed tore the heart from the Sangheli that had challenged him for leadership. The Chosen of Khorne drank deeply of the indigo blood of the alien. He added the creature's skull to the growing pyramid of offerings to the Soul Eater.

"**Challenge me!**" Richard roared into the halls as he took up his Hellblade and Skalletjuv and stalked the corridors of the ship.

"Our Lord demands more souls, more blood and more skulls!"

A pair of Jiralhanae roared and charged. The blessings of Khorne were evident in the pair. Their eyes were solid bronze and they had burned the sacred Rune of Khorne into their flesh. Richard sidestepped a punishing swing from a gravity hammer and decapitated one of the Brutes as the other fired its Spiker. The rounds clanked ineffectively against the thrice damned armor encasing his unholy form. Skalletjuv drank deep of the Brute's soul.

He eventually reached the quivering mass of bronze and flesh that piloted the Crimson Revenant. "How long before we reach Earth? The patience of Khorne wears thin! The Lord of Skulls demands we slaughter his foes on Earth!"

"**Glory to Khorne. We arrive within the day**". The mass of flesh spat.

The Bloody Handed growled as blood laced spittle escaped the mortal embodiment of rage. He turned from the bridge and once again bellowed for some soul to rise to his challenge. A day without slaughter in Khorne's name was blasphemy. Richard the Bloody Handed would never blaspheme. His sole purpose was bloody war in the name of his God.

"**Khorne demands blood!**"

Surface of Installation 05

"Fan out! Find the Arbiter!"

K'xon Rtau kept to the canopy of the trees. The foolish Jiralhanae never thought to look up. They assumed the Arbiter would remain on ground level due to the difficulty his species has climbing.

The Arbiter had to admit that the climb had been difficult.

Now! The Arbiter's opportunity had come. The Brutes had broken into smaller groups in an attempt to find him quickly. The Elite leapt from a thick branch and landed on top of one of the Jiralhanae hunters. The hiss of superheated air heralded the activation of the Arbiter's blade. He quickly dispatched the other Brute and melted into the woods.

There were ruins in the distance. The Arbiter ran for them knowing in the enclosed spaces he could negate their numerical advantage. Light shimmered as the Elite activated his active camouflage. He sat unmoving as another Brute hunting pack barrled through the forest.

No subtlety. The Arbiter waited until two of the three had passed. The pacing was fundamentally sound, for a Jiralhanae at least. He quickly attacked with his blade. The heat of the plasma cauterized the wounds. There was no gurgling of blood or cry of panic. The Arbiter quickly retreated into the undergrowth.

"Kractus, report!" Gzatus hissed into the communicator. The cries and hoots of Halo's native life rustled in the background.

"Kractus!" Only the braying of some creature replied.

"Ikatus, do you see Kractus?"

The other Jiralhanae turned around. "I don't see him. He's not responding. I have nothing on passive sensors following our trail. There are too many native pests to get a solid reading."

Gzatus growled. "Close distance with me. I want you in visual range."

"Affirmative."

Gzatus fiddled with the active sensors. _Foolish device!_ He turned around and there was no sight of Ikatus.

The device whirred. Something was in the area. Gzatus drew his Mauler. Where was the contact? A hateful sound filled his ears. _An Elite!_

Gzatus dove to his left and only lost a piece of his shoulder. The Blade disappeared. Gzatus howled in pain as he fired in the direction the Blade had been traveling. A sapling shattered as the Mauler struck. The ignition sound erupted from the right. Gzatus rolled to a proper firing position and snapped off a pair of shots. The shields of the Elite flared as it charged. The active camouflage powered down as the Elite reached sword range.

"The Arbiter!" Gzatus roared. He swung his mauler at the Arbiter. The Arbiter countered and severed the gun arm of the Jiralhanae. The

Blade reared back and a thrust severed the Brute's spine.

The Elite continued on before the body had hit the ground. The ruins loomed large as K'xon Rtau emerged from the forests. There were a number of Sangheli and Jiralhanae corpses in front of the Ruins. The Arbiter drew his Plasma Rifle and began to climb the stairs. He reached a small plaza and froze. His motion tracker picked up a large amount of movement at the top of the stairs. The deceptive stone doors opened and a Hunter Pair emerged. The Arbiter lowered his left hand towards his Plasma grenades.

"The Arbiter! They said you were dead!" N'tho Sraomee emerged from behind one of the Hunters.

"Hail, N'tho Sraomee. It gladdens me that you have fought well."

"You have my gratitude. T'kyn Nakanee and J'han Sirmee have also survived."

"The Brutes have betrayed us." The Arbiter deactivated his weapons and walked into the Ruins.

"We have been battling them for some time now, Arbiter." N'tho spoke as he fell in beside his commander.

"The Mgalekgolo and many Grunts have sided with us, but that is not our most surprising ally."

"Who else has come to our aid? Kig-Yar?"

"No, honored Arbiter. Those mercenaries have remained attached to the Prophets' purses. Our newest allies are human."

The Arbiter stopped mid step. "Oracle Master Yuer's mission succeeded?"

"I am unaware the Venerable Yuer has made any reports of his mission. The Humans have been most receptive to fighting against our mutual foe. They are commendable warriors. Inventive."

"Well done. You have an instinctive sense of duty, N'tho."

"Thank you Arbiter, I must admit that I was preparing myself for retribution from the College for heresy. Our peoples have been at war for so long."

The Arbiter widened his mandibles. "This is a new Age. The Ninth Age of Reclamation has ended."

The pair rounded a corner escorted by the Hunters. The Arbiter first saw the humans. They were sitting a defensive position. Each human was taking turns sleeping or maintaining their weapons. There was a truce but trust was threadbare.

"Hail humans." The Arbiter spoke passable, if gurgling English.

"They're doing it again." Corporal Wallace muttered as he accepted a canteen from Vacan.

"Hail Elite." Sergeant Kolak said as he inclined his head. The rest of the humans spoke a collection of greetings.

"You have rested?"

"As much as possible. Three Bravo Kilo attacks kept interrupting my nap."

"You speak of the Jiralhanae." The Arbiter continued to appraise the humans.

"Right, those bastards kept charging up the stairs." Private Kenyon's tone was dismissive.

The Arbiter cast a glance at the other Elites. J'han Sirmee leaned closer to the Arbiter.

"Bastard is a human term for a child forsaken by the father."

"A fitting term for the Jiralhanae." An Elite forsaken by his father, and therefore his clan, had no honor or opportunity for glory.

The Arbiter turned to the other Sangheli. "We must stop Tartarus. He is going to light the Rings."

"Is that not what we have long dreamed of?" An Elite whose name was not known to the Arbiter.

"Your name?"

"U'an Tineree, Arbiter."

The Arbiter took a deep breath. "The Forerunners did ascend, but they did it through deeds. The lighting of the Halos ended them. They did not become gods when the Sacred Rings were activated. They died. The Sacred Rings are sacred because they show the dedication of the Forerunners to duty. _That _is what I honor the Forerunners for."

"You speak of the Old Ways."

"Perhaps we were fools to abandon them so quickly."

There was silence. "We must head to the Control Center. The Brutes are a disorganized rabble. We can reach the firing chamber before the Jiralhanae and secure it."

U'an inclined his head. "What of the humans?"

"They shall accompany us as a show of the sincerity of our mutual cause."

"I agree with the Arbiter. The Humans are resourceful." T'kyn Nakanee spoke up.

"Collect the humans and ready the Hunters. What other forces do we have?" Once again, the Sangheli acquiesced to K'xon's command.

"There are three hundred Uggnoy in a service area. We believe they may be using some kind of narcotic."

The Arbiter lowered his head and stared slack mandibled U'an. "How impaired are they?"

"Less than we feared. I have placed them under watch of several Minor Domos. They are keeping them in line."

"Gather them. Inform them that if they fight well against the Jiralhanae, they shall be rewarded with double the current allotment."

"At once Arbiter."

The Elites quickly carried out their orders. Sergeant Keller gathered up the Covenant Carbine he had been given and order the troops to move out.

He was really beginning to hate Halo.

B5-2E

Trekatus stared down at the world known as B5-E2. There were three sickly green super storms ravaging the northern hemisphere.

"Scans!" Trekatus shouted at one of his crewmen.

"There is too much interference from the storms!"

The Brute Warlord tapped the shaft of his Gravity Hammer against the deck. "Prepare to deploy to the southern hemisphere. We will investigate why this world has fallen out of contact. I will brook no cowardice in our Cleansing of the Elites!"

Jiralhanae Alphas acted quickly to carry out their Chieftain's orders. A flight of Phantoms was prepared and Trekatus elite packs were readied to reclaim the world for the Covenant.

The Phantoms slipped through the clouds that hugged the world like a miasma of decay.

"My Chieftainâ€¦ Our sensors cannot penetrate the clouds."

The roar that escaped the Jiralhanae overlord caused his underlings to cower. "Land at the nearest settlement!"

"At once Chieftain!" The Phantom pilot responded with fervor. The Covenant troop transport was buffeted by the storms.

Trekatus was the first out of the transport. He immediately wished he hadn't been. The air was foul and reeked of decay. The miasma that had blinded the Phantom's sensors clung to the ground. Even the ground had been corrupted. The surface of the planet was a soupy mess.

In the distance, the Covenant soldiers could swear they heard and saw a grand revelry. A lone figure approached the waiting delegation. Trekatus wretched at the utterly overwhelming and unnatural smells. The confusion increased when the shambling form started

humming.

"Chieftain! I am Trekatus, emissary of the Prophets! Why has this world not responded to the muster?"

"We've ignored it. The authority of the false Prophets is a joke amongst us here." The reply was more of a gurgle than any spoken language.

"Heretic!"

The miasma dissipated from the figure and the Jiralhanae recoiled in horror. There were weeping boils, numerous sores and countless other ravages covering the creature's body.

"We would have to follow the deluded scriptures of your Covenant to be Heretics. No, Trekatus, this world has embraced a new faith. The True Faith! Look around you! There is a joy we never experienced under the yoke of the Prophets!"

"Fire!" Trekatus ordered with an edge of hysteria leaking into his voice.

Plasma and kinetic slugs erupted from the pack. Djakarta roared in defiance as he waddled through a portion of the fire. "For Grandfather Nurgle! For our Freedom!"

Djakarta swung his rusted Gravity Hammer in a wild arc. One Covenant Brute collapsed as his skull was crushed like an over ripe melon. Thousands of droning voices took up the Chieftain of Nurgle war cry. The emissary of the Hierarchs stared in mute horror as hundreds of infected Jiralhanae rushed forward on tumor ravaged legs. Foul cyclopean creatures shouting their tally of plagues and malignity struggled to keep pace with their allies. Above them all a corpulent giant with a mace the size of a Wraith bellowed fatherly encouragements.

Trekatus despaired and the children of Nurgle rushed to comfort him.

Installation 05

The Aristocrats led the charge into the Brute positions. Their Honor blades carved through the Jiralhanae leaders. The other slaves of the Hierarchs fell to the rest of the Elites or to the Humans.

The Elites were surprised by the tenacity of the humans. The higher ranking Elites were still concerned by the enthusiasm of a few of the younger Sangheli regarding the humans. The Zealots and Major Domos occasionally cast a backward glance at their 'allies'. They were expecting the humans to cast aside their façade of cooperation and extract righteous vengeance for the burning of their worlds.

"Magalan! Jackals sweeping left!" Private Richards yelled as he dove behind a fallen tree.

"I see them!" The zip of Magalan's lasguns filled Richard's ears. He was reloading his Needler when the Plasma Mortars started raining down. The UNSC marine was a veteran of several campaigns. He

recognized the distinctive whirring of incoming Wraith fire.

"Incoming!" A chorus of human voices cried out in unison. The reactions of all present were telling. The Humans dove for cover, but never exposed themselves to the Brutes. The Uggnoy wailed in terror and flailed in the open. Several were cut down by Jackal sharpshooters. The Elites maintained superb discipline. They used their superior natural and mechanical senses to gauge the location of the incoming fire. If necessary, they took cover. If unnecessary, they continued with their previous objective.

No being was prepared for where the shots landed. The second line of the Covenant Loyalist forces was shredded by the barrage. Jackals and younger Brutes simply vanished amidst expanding plasma.

"Did the Covenant just Blue on Blue?" Corporal Wallace shouted to Private Adams.

"I can't see shit sir!" The young private shouted as he suppressed a Jackal.

The Arbiter smashed aside a Juvenile Brute as the Wraith slid gracefully into a firing position. There was a moment of hesitation as the intentions of the tank were still unclear. All concerns were erased with the plasma cannons opened fire on those loyal to the Prophets. The surviving Jiralhanae and Jackals fled in disarray.

A mighty cheer was raised by the Elites as R'tau Vadum leapt from the opened hatch.

"Arbiter! I should have had more faith in your skills."

The Arbiter ground his mandibles. "I hope you did not expect me to fall to a Jiralhanae."

R'tas placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. "No, brother. I expected you to kill hundreds of the scum and the Prophets to rain fire from their fleet upon you."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Commander. I must commend your excellent timing."

"You honor me, Arbiter." He inclined his head and laughed. "I did not expect Oracle Master Yeur to succeed so magnificently."

The Arbiter realized that Commander Vadumee was referring to the humans. "The humans are capable warriors, but they knew nothing of our gift to their species until N'tho Sraomee told them. However, I do not expect our cooperation to last long after the last Brute."

"I do not dispute that and their very survival against our might is proof of their valor and skill. What objective are you pursuing, Arbiter?"

"Tartarus must be stopped. He seeks to light the Rings."

R'tas was silent. "My entire life, I dreamed that the honor of lighting the Sacred Rings would be mine. Now I realize that the purpose of the Rings is likely another of the Prophet's

lies."

"What will you do now, Commander?"

R'tas nodded in the direction of the Assault Carrier holding station on the horizon. "I'm going to get that ship back."

The Arbiter motioned for a lance of Minor Elites. "You are to serve with Commander Vadumee and retake the Assault Carrier."

"Fight with honor, Arbiter."

"The same, Commander." The Elites parted ways.

The Arbiter shouted over to N'tho. "Gather our forces! There is an airbase to the east."

N'tho pounded his chest. "Human warriors, did you hear the orders?"

"We heard." Sergeant Kolak's voice was distant. "Collect Raj's tags and effects."

"What do we do with his body sir? He deserves some kind of burial."

"He does." Keller said as he stared at the lifeless body of the Guardsmen. Oland collected his personal items: a photo of a young woman, a book filled with quotations of a few Imperial saints and his identification. "What is the position on cremation?"

"It's allowed."

"Good, no Brute or Jackal is going to defile his corpse. Grab one of the Flame grenades. It's probably not quite kosher, but..."

"Considering the situation, it'll have to do. Vacan, your dad was a priest. You give Raj his last rites." Sergeant Kolak ordered.

Nai took a deep breath. "The Emperor shall call to the heavens from above, and through the Imperium, that he may judge his people. Gather the Martyrs together unto Him on Earth; those that have served with Him through sacrifice. And He shall declare the righteousness of the Martyrs: for the God-Emperor is judge himself. For every world of the galaxy is His. Offer unto the God-Emperor thanksgiving; and pay vows unto the most High! And call upon Him on the field of battle: Him on Earth shall deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify the Golden Throne."

The flames consumed the dead Cadian. Through it all the Elites watched in silence. The Sangheli knew the necessity of an honorable passing. The Humans turned and nodded.

"We're ready. Let's move out."

Until that moment, the squads had felt nearly untouchable. The weight of the first casualty weighed on them heavily. There would be a blood price to be paid.

Rtas had transferred one of the Wraiths to the Arbiter's unit. Its presence was welcomed and helped shatter the token resistance of the Kig-Yar.

"A Scarab!" Corporal Wallace breathed.

"This can be a major boon for us. Look! The crew disembarks!" N'tho's voice was filled with excitement.

"Forward! We must secure the Assault Platform!" A Sangheli Zealot roared.

Uggnoy entered the tunnels first. They were promptly shredded by Brute shot fire. The sheer number of Uggnoy drained the ammo from the Jiralhanae weapons. The Sangheli were on them before the Jiralhanae even had a chance to reload their weapons. The Arbiter and the other Elite Swordsmen deftly carved through the Brutes. Keller never even had to raise his weapons.

"Keep close to the Hunters!" The Humans and the Mgalekgolo possessed the heaviest weapons. It would fall to them to smash apart any enemy strong points.

Eventually, the motley assortment reached a large central complex. A pair of Elites activated their active camo and for several minutes they scouted the area.

"What have you learned?" The Arbiter spoke into nothingness, but to the great surprise of the humans the scouts materialized.

"There are holding cells ahead. There are four Councilors and a Mgalekgolo bonded pair being held by the Jiralhanae."

"And a way to the Scarab and the air field?"

"A large lift is on the other side of the Holding Chamber. There is something else, Honored Arbiter." J'han Sirmee stood tall.

"What is it?"

"Tartarus was herding a pair of humans. A warrior and a shipmaster."

The Arbiter looked to the humans. "It was the two who reached the Index."

Sergeant Keller perked up. "Sergeant Johnson and Commander Keyes are still alive?"

"Keyes?" One of the higher ranking Elites growled.

"Miranda, daughter of Captain Jacob Keyes." Keller answered.

"A lineage worthy of respect." The Zealot nodded approvingly.

"We've got to get them back." One of the humans spoke in a harsh whisper.

The Elite leaders made a motion to advance. Their quarry was close and it was time to end this game of cat and mouse.

Tartarus kicked the corpse of a long dead Tyranid bioform off the edge of the platform. Salvation was within the grasp of the Covenant yet the Chieftain could not the escape the shortcomings of the universe. The Sangheli were nipping at their heels. The High Chieftain could even hear the sounds of conflict at the base of the elevator!

"You have failed to kill the Arbiter! He must not interfere!"

"Chieftain of the Jiralhanae, he has nearly four lances of his mongrel brethren, many Uggnoy and even Mgalekgolo and Humans fighting at his side!" A younger Brute manning the barricades in the holding cells responded.

"And we have righteousness at ours! Kill them all!" Tartarus roared. The Lift came to rest and the doors slid open.

"Put the humans on different transports. The shipmaster will be on mine. The pack leader will be transported on the Assault Platform." Tartarus stopped and appraised the area. "Seal the doors, permanently."

Brute Captain Major Grakatus shifted and the light of Substance glinted off his armor. "What of our warriors fighting the Heretics?"

Tartarus threw Commander Keyes into a waiting Phantom. "They shall be the Vanguard of the Great Journey."

Tartarus leapt into the Phantom with his personal guard in tow. The remaining Brutes watched their Chieftain fly towards glory. The Captain Major grunted towards a pair of youthful warriors who had not yet earned their honorifics.

They saluted and began to seal the doors. The two had barely finished when the elevator's door began to glow with heat.

"Defensive positions!" The Captain Major bellowed as he spooled his Plasma Cannon up.

The door shattered a half minute before the Jiralhanae had reached their position. Two pairs of Hunters led the spearhead. Brute weaponry washed off the Mgalekgolo shieldwall like a gentle rain. Their assault Cannons scoured the most secured position.

Avery was pushed to the ground by his enraged guard. The impetuous guard ignored his human charge as he fired at the surging Elites and their allies.

"Hey Donkey Kong!"

Avery took a running leap as the Brute spun around. The alien's confusion turned to rage and finally to horror in the space of a single breath. Sergeant Johnson stabbed the knife he had secreted away deep into the Brute's eye. The Brute howled in pain and tried to grab Johnson's throat.

"Uh uh! Ain't havin' none of that!" Johnson shouted and twisted the

blade. Johnson was running for the Scarab before the Brute hit the ground.

"Adams! Cover Maljan!" Sergeant Keller shouted as he desperately tried to staunch the tide of Jiralhanae attempting to flank the Hunters.

"On it!" The marine roared as he tossed aside his barren Plasma Rifle and dove for a Brute Shot. The young man slid a belt of grenades into the weapon. He popped to his feet and fired a pair of shots that caused an advancing Brute to duck into cover.

"Vince! Big Monkey carrying the heavy weapon!" Maljan slid into position next to Private Adams.

"I see him! On three?" Maljan nodded in agreement.

"THREE!" The pair shouted as one and leapt to their feet. The relentlessly advancing Brute officer was turned into soup by the storm of grenade and plasma fire.

The humans dove back into cover. Adams cast a sideways glance at his compatriot. "I didn't realize you could fire that thing fully auto!"

"It's discouraged. There's a small chance the Magnetic containment could fail."

"What would happen then?"

"It'd explode."

Adams could only bark the word what, when everything suddenly went quiet. The only sounds were the growl of the Hunters and the hissing of hydraulics.

"Sergeant Keller, care to explain why you're helping Elites?"

Sergeant Johnson's voice boomed through the speakers of the Scarab.

"There's evidently a cease fire between the Elites, Hunters and us, sir."

The Arbiter stepped forward. "The Sangheli and Mgalekgolo have been betrayed by the Prophets and Brutes. Our war against you is at an end."

"And if we don't stop that grey ape, everything will be at an end." Johnson

"Then we must hurry. If you will transfer the Assault Plaâ€¦"

Avery shook his head. "_Hell no_. I'm keeping this baby. I'll need some help running it. Send Sergeant Keller and his boys and _one_ Elite to help run it."

The Arbiter wasn't thrilled with the arrangement. He, however, could not argue with a human who was pointing a weapon of mass destruction

at him. "Your terms are acceptable. However, we cannot leave the Hunters behind. We will need their support."

"Sergeant Keller, UNSC channels."

Keller reactivated his UNSC gear. "Yes sir?"

Avery fished for a cigar, but came up empty. "Will the Elites turn on us?"

"At least not yet, sir. They are more focused on the Brutes."

"What about the Hunters?"

"If we don't attack them first, I think they'll be content to ignore us."

"You better be right. Which Elite should we let on board?"

"I think his name is N'tho something. I can't pronounce their names."

Avery nodded and switched from his own gear to the Scarab's comms. "Alright you've got a deal. Send N'tho with the Hunters and my boys."

K'xon nods. "It will be so."

The reunion on the Scarab was warm. "Sarge! It's good to see you again."

Johnson shook his head. "Wish it was back on Earth with a beer and a cigar. You're short a man."

"We lost Guardsmen Raj."

"Damn." Avery was quiet as he looked at the Elite. "Alright, boys. Let's stop King Kong from killing us all."

"Just another day at the office." Kenyon forced a grin as he set up the mortar at the front of the Scarab.

The Chaos Tyrant Cruiser _Sorceress's Eclipse _in Warp Transit

The hangar bay was cloaked in a pall of exhaust fumes, hallucinogenic incense and the smoke of a hundred and one sacrifices. Lucy sat cross-legged as the minor psychics prayed to the Changer of Ways. The Sorceress knew that the Architect of Fate was fickle and was wont to ignore prayer.

That was not to say Tzeentch did not accept the prayers. Tzeentch fed on hope and the prayers of mortals were filled with desperate hope.

"Enough." Lucilla's near whisper silenced the chattering masses. A thousand eyes turned to the Chosen of Tzeentch.

"We are exiting the Warp. Ready your troops for landings." Lucy's pronouncement set off a firestorm of activity. She worked her way to bridge and sought out the ship's Master.

"What is the disposition of the enemy space forces?"

"A single platform is detected. Our Lance Batteries out range them."

Lucy looked over the display. _Tom, I will remove the Super MAC platform. You may begin your landings._

Come now Lucy. Leave it to the armed merchantmen. You deserve this revenge as much as I do.

The Merchantmen will be gutted by the platform.

And?

We may need them later, Tom.

Fine, send the Escorts.

"No, Master Sao. The Escorts will destroy the platform. Signal them. We move into orbit to begin the landings."

"As you wish, Sorceress

The Escort Squadron raced ahead. Lucy smiled inwardly at the screams of devotion from the fleet. The MAC Platform raged at the Chaos incursion. One of the Escorts fell afoul of the platform's rage and was cored. The Chaos Wolfpack circled the orbital facility and ravaged it with weapons fire.

On the surface, Kurt leaned over the central display. "We've lost the MAC. Endless Summer, what's the status on the bunkers?"

"If this "Chaos" wishes to bombard us, the bunkers will only hold for a moment."

"They won't bombard us. Tom and Lucy aren't that type." Kurt practically barked at the AI.

Endless Summer leaned on his holographic spear. "Sir, are you sure you know their 'type' anymore?"

"Call it a hunch." Dr. Halsey said as she chewed on her lip. "Any word from the UNSC?"

"There has been no further contact with the UNSC beyond confirmation that Earth received our message." Endless Summer was clearly displeased with the extended human contact.

Sergeant Mendez chimed in. "I'm going to contact the companies and let them know."

Kurt shook his head. "I'm sorry Sergeant. That's my job."

"This is Lieutenant Commander Ambrose. The enemy has achieved orbit. You are Spartans, the finest soldiers of the UNSC. You do not just fight for Earth and her colonies. You fight for your fellow soldiers and I fight for you. This is what you have trained to do. You are ready and I am proud of you."

Dr. Halsey smiled. "An excellent speech, Kurt."

Kurt clamped his helmet into position. "The time for speeches is over. It's time for war."

The sky outside was set afire by the arrival of Chaos. In bunkers and firing positions, the Children of Onyx waited for the inevitable.

And the inevitable was far worse than they could have ever imagined. Camp Currahe was assaulted by two armored soldiers that dwarfed the Spartan-IIs. The soldiers emerged from a pall of darkness and fire. The armor was covered in the remains of defeated foes and runes which bent the space around them.

There was a moment where the Spartans felt a pang of fear. They responded admirably and opened fire with M319 grenade launchers. It was revealed to be a futile gesture of defiance. The grenades turned out to be nigh useless against Tactical Dreadnought Armor. The Chaos Terminators raised their accursed heavy flamers and put the base to the torch. The screams of Team Kopis flooded the channels as their position was consumed by the unholy flames.

"Heavy weapons!" Mendez screamed. Team Claymore's Gauss Warthogs sped into a clean firing position and unleashed a flurry of shots. One of the Chaos warriors was knocked off his feet by the impacts. The enemy juggernaut was slow to get up and there were visible dents and gashes in his armor. A howl of rage escaped from the hideously tusked helmet and the Terminator charged forward. Claymore scattered and was fortunate to avoid the wild charge. Warthog Three was especially lucky as the Power Ax of the Chaos Marine only took off a portion of their rear. The Chaos Terminator's counterpart continued to torch the Spartan-III command center with near impunity.

"Everyone evacuate this facility and get to the Elephant! Team Claymore and Scimitar, you are to cover the evacuation. Keep them busy! All teams initiate Contingency Plan Alpha. Melt into the Forests and prepare for the main landings!"

The rapid cracks of the M41 Chain gun and Team Claymore's Gauss cannon shots joined the dark symphony of the Chaos Terminator's flamers.

Tom and Lucy watched from a distant hill top as their Rubric Marines stood sentinel.

"Do they suspect?" Tom asked through his death mask.

"Of course not. They are as blind to the nature of this place as we once were." Lucy grimaced.

"I hated this place. Especially the rain." The Chaos sorcerer's voice was distant.

"We will have time for nostalgia later, my beloved. I will gather the lesser psykers. If we do not complete our objective in Zone 67 all our plans and hopes will be as dust."

The Astartes nodded. "Fly quickly. I will move to secure our entrance

to the Plains of Metal."

Lucy recalled her Rubric Marines to their urns and took to the air on her unnatural wings. Tom turned to his sentinels. "Destiny is within our grasp."

The Sarcophagi responded only with silence.

20. Chapter 20

****Pre-emptive Author's Note: ****"There are those who said this day would never come. What have they to say now?"

* * *

><p>Sydney, Australia

Netanel towered over Lord Hood as the Emperor's Guardian led the UNSC to where Behar had sequestered himself after the contact with the Elite Councilor. The disappearance of the powerful psychic had been a complete surprise to many of the commanders. The Imperials it seemed were endlessly debating the religious significance of the event.

Netanel turned to Lord Hood as they reached a barred door. "You must be prepared for what you experience on the other side."

Custodian Aagney inclined his head as he opened the door. Lord Hood cast a furtive glance at the Emperor's Praetorians. "What is on the other side?"

"Eternity."

Lord Hood took a step of a thousand miles as he entered the door. Distance, physical form and even time were flowing like a river in the small chamber Tsavaras had claimed for his purposes.

"What?" The voice was lost in a sea of pure thought. The Emperor sat upon the horizon. His brow was slick with sweat and blood. The enigmatic man opened his eyes and in a rush of emotion, order and form were returned to the tiny sitting room.

"Forgive me, Lord Hood. I know it can be difficult for the unprepared to experience even the afterimage of my psychic abilities."

Lord Hood took a deep breath to steady himself. "I am returning to orbit to oversee the Naval operations."

Behar worked to catch his breath. "Very well. I wish you success, Lord Hood."

"Thank you. If I may ask, what were you doing?"

"I have been struggling against the Chaos entities. I.." Tsavaras wiped some blood from his ear. "I was interfering with the Warp Currents leading to Earth. They were clear and granted the Enemy swift travels to Earth. If the Warp Squalls hold, the forces of Chaos will be slowed considerably."

"I believe I understand."

"Of course, is there anything else you require, Lord Hood?"

"No. Good Luck, Dr. Tsavaras."

"We will need it." Behar smiled, but the Admiral found no solace in it.

Forests of Onyx

The drumbeat of war filled the world of Onyx. Chaos rampaged across the surface of the planet. Maddened cultists howled for the Spartans to face them in open combat until they were hoarse. Spartan marksmen smiled behind their visors as they cut down the braggarts. After an hour, only the most dedicated of Khorne's Space Marines bellowed their challenges to the shadows.

"O to G-099, confirm visual on hostile APC."

Team Saber had followed Lt. Commander Ambrose's orders to fall back into the vast forests of Onyx. Chaos outnumbered the Spartans and possessed heavy armor and other, more esoteric, weaponry. However, most of the enemy forces were untrained zealots. The training of the Spartans gave them an advantage.

"Direction and escort?"

"It's headed north towards the Treehouse. Escorted by two squads of dismounted infantry. Looks like they have a flamethrower and a heavy machine gun in each squad."

"Affirmative. Have you been detected?"

"No, Saber Lead. I have fallen back to deliver this report."

"Very well O. We are moving to intercept."

The Spartans slipped through the dense forests to the ambush point. Ash took up position where he could monitor his entire team. 'The' Mark scrambled up a cedar-like tree to take up an advantageous firing position. Dante was placing a clutch of explosives in a position to take out one of the vehicles. The SPARTAN-IIIs completed their tasks quickly and efficiently.

Ash was proud of his team. They were the forest and the enemy had no idea Saber even existed. Granted, the enemy militia were not exactly organized or disciplined. They didn't need to be. Chaos outnumbered the Spartans dozens of times. Saber had not heard many reports, but they knew at least two more teams had been lost. Ash and the others had seen Kopis put to the torch. A fragmented message from Team Machete reported strange machines flooding from an alien structure, but was quickly cut off. G-099 swore to himself that his team wouldn't meet the same fates.

A series of radio clicks assured Ash that the team was in position. The Spartans sat in silence as they watched the first Chaos mob pass the explosive. The enemy APC was festooned with trophy racks. The flame turrets had organic looking dragon's-head decorations.

"Dante, deliver the package." A click was the only response. After a heartbeat, there was a flash and soon the APC was engulfed in flames. Team Saber immediately engaged the enemy.

Ash dropped a screaming zealot with a well placed burst. Dante dropped half of the trailing squad with an eerily accurate grenade shot. A sword wielding mad-man was brained by The Mark's accurate shots.

Saber was moving after they launched each attack. The surviving Chaos Flamethrower was belching into the forest trying to drive the Spartans from their cover. The horned enemy collapsed after a pistol shot through the side of his head. Holly and Ash moved amongst the enemy dead quietly putting a bullet in any Chaos soldiers that had a spark of life in them.

"Saber, target eliminated. Good work everybody." Ash spoke with all the exhausted authority he could muster. He had known combat would be his life when he became a Spartan, but this was something he never expected. This was not the war he had trained for. This war was primal. It was for a prize greater than even the survival of the human race.

It was a war for the preservation of, for lack of a better term, the human soul.

Installation 05

"Shade Turret at 11 o'clock!" Nai Vacan shouted as he took cover behind a pillar on the Scarab's platform.

Sergeant Keller pulled Adams from a collapsed barricade. The UNSC marine wasn't seriously hurt, but he was staggered. A Banshee screamed overhead and demolished the Brute Turret with a blast from its Fuel Rod Cannon. The humans recognized the loyalty of the Covenant flyer before it fired due to a large Sangheli Rune carved into the sides.

"Get that fire out!" Sergeant Kolak yelled over the roar of a Hunter's cannon. N'tho tossed Wallace a packet of a foul smelling muck. Wallace dumped the foul concoction over the flame.

Waljan and Oland were taking pot shots at any enemy that presented itself.

"Sergeant Johnson, how far are we from the objective?" Kolak struggled to keep from growling.

"Sixteen kilometers." Johnson shouted over the crashing footfalls of the Scarab.

Ross caught a magazine from Majalan. "Let's hope the Elites can cover us until then!"

Kenyon winced as a Banshee slammed into the cliff face surrounding the Scarab. "Hope is the first step on the road to disappointment."

The Sangheli were drawing on all their considerable skill in their

attempts to stem the tide of Brute aircraft. Sangheli aircraft were deftly avoiding the fire, but the superior numbers of the Prophet loyalists were beginning to tell. Three Sangheli Banshees had fallen since the capture of the Scarab. The first fell to an anti-aircraft Wraith formation. The second met an inglorious fate when dozens of Yam'ee detonated Plasma grenades while swarming over the hull.

H'kan Dranyee had somehow managed to keep his damaged craft flying despite his own grievous wounds. The Arbiter had envied H'kan's sacrifice as the young Minor Domo crashed the Banshee into a Jiralhanae Phantom.

K'xon brought his Banshee into a corkscrew. As he reached the apex, he destroyed an enemy Banshee with the fuel rod cannon before falling in behind another Brute Banshee. Plasma fire silenced the other enemy.

"No further contacts, Arbiter." The forward Banshee reported. He was the only Sangheli permitted to speak. A flick of a Comm Rune was the only acknowledgement transmitted.

"Distance 10 klicks." Sergeant Johnson barked on the comm.

"A new wave of enemy craft, approaching from north, northeast." The scout spoke with relish.

The Arbiter and his brothers were the sea wall that their enemies would crash upon and be broken.

High Charity

"Truth is being escorted to a Forerunner ship at the center of the city!"

Master Chief discarded the empty Needler and picked up a spike rifle from a dead Brute. The Covenant was resisting fiercely, but their attention was divided. The battle between the Elites and Brutes had entered into a bloody stalemate and neither side could dislodge the other. The Flood had completely changed the equation. The Gravemind, the ancient intelligence of the Flood called, upon the Flood's racial memories of the Forerunner War and used history itself as a weapon. Panic and doubt had spread through both sides of the Schism. Cortana had intercepted raging debates between Sangheli Ship Masters over bombarding High Charity to contain the Flood. The Brutes were whipped into a fury and their commander was directing their rage toward the Flood. The Master Chief had been all but forgotten in the strategic chaos. Only Truth's army of bodyguards was focused on the SPARTAN now.

Cortana appeared in a holoprojector. "Overriding security on this door. I have to warn you though, this is the fastest route to intercept Truth. Unfortunately, it's through a major front of the battle. There is heavy Flood Corruption approaching this location."

"Understood, Cortana." The door slid open as Cortana disappeared into the network. The SPARTAN-II immediately moved to the nearest cover. There was a thick miasma clinging to the air. Flesh-like growths were forcing their way out of airvents. John was beginning to understand just how apt the Forerunner's designation for the parasite was. The

Gravemind and his children had infected High Charity scant hours ago and large sections of the massive space-borne city were altered beyond recognition.

The growl warned Master Chief of the incoming attack. Flood infection forms scuttled forward and absorbed the spiker fire. John knew he couldn't risk running out of ammo before the Combat Forms launched their assault. He was quickly reduced to crushing the balloon-like parasites underfoot or slashing the ones that leapt at his face. The attack was relatively light and the super soldier defeated the pair of Combat Forms that had attacked.

They were obviously scouting for the Gravemind and pushing the Flood Corruption further into the heart of High Charity.

"_Fear not, children of the Covenant! The Flood _shall not_ consume us! They shall break upon our unconquerable bastions! Maintain your faith and none shall overcome you!_" The High Prophet of Truth's voice exploded across High Charity. Each word was seemingly punctuated by the sound of mortal combat.

"_Arrogant creatures! Your deaths will be instantaneous, while we shall suffer the progress of infinitude!_" _The Gravemind's retort was not heard over loud speakers. Instead, it was felt in the very core of every being's soul.

_Is he a psyker? _John-117 thought grimly. The Imperial Fists had informed Master Chief of the terrible potential of psychic beings. If the Gravemind had any pyshic potential, the monstrosity's threat level rose beyond its original merely apocalyptic levels.

The Spartan was losing time. John could not afford the luxury of thought now! Truth was the Supreme Leader of the Covenant. If John captured him, the UNSC and Imperium could force an end to hostilities with the Covenant. There was no doubt the Covenant would accept the human terms. Especially now with the knife of the Flood, Chaos and Civil War at their throats.

John redoubled his focus and advanced down an unrecognizable corridor. The Flood had subverted every aspect of High Charity. The clean and flowing alien architecture had been completely covered by grotesque parasitic growth. Ichor pulsed through translucent veins.

The door at the end of the corridor struggled to open and the Master Chief Petty Officer emerged into an full scale battle. Flood forms pounded on a Brute position like a storm driven tide. The situation had become so desperate that a Locust Siege Platform had joined the battle. The large quadrapedal walker scoured the Flood from existence, but the extensions of the Gravemind were numberless.

The armored warrior sprinted across the dangerously open ground as the quadruped Covenant vehicle fired a pink beam into a surging mass of Combat forms. A gaggle of Grunts noticed the charging human. They opened fire with Needlers and the pink crystals depleted the MJOLNIR's shields slightly. John eliminated the Grunts quickly. One of the Brute handlers roared at the Spartan and prepared to charge. The alien was quickly attacked by a trio of Infection Forms. There was a sickening sound as the Infection Forms forced their way into their new host's body. Hideous fungal growths erupted across the

Jiralhanae. In a matter of seconds, the Flood had altered the simian creature into a rotting and shambling monster. The right arm had become a nest of tentacles and feather like fronds were growing from its shoulder. The Plasma Rifle was held loosely in the left hand.

John was shocked when the Flood Combat form dropped the Rifle and picked up a number of plasma grenades. The action was so graceful that it seemed out of place. The Flood leapt at the Locust and detonated its collection of grenades against the walker's leg joint. The Siege Platform became unbalanced and collapsed. Master Chief was soon engulfed in a dust cloud. He shifted vision modes from visible light to low light amplification as he rushed through the obstruction. Sierra-117 leapt onto the platform in his haste to cross the warzone. The Flood promptly ambushed him. Weapons fire nearly dropped his shields. The human super soldier put down several combat forms and struggled to put enough distance between him and the revived Flood forms. A harsh impact sent him sprawling. Chief barely saw the Combat form as he landed on a gravity lift.

"Chief, you've nearly caught up to Truth. I'll seal and shut down this lift after you are through!" Cortana's familiar voice rasped in his helmet.

"Affirmative, Cortana."

Instinctively, John-117 rubbed the fresh dent on his MJOLNIR armor. He could feel the bruise from the close call with the Combat form. There was no doubt that the blow would have likely killed any being not wearing some form of powered armor. The soldier pushed such thoughts from his head as the gravity lift brought him ever closer to the Prophet of Truth.

Onyx

A hundred slaves labored to convert the captured barracks into a temple worthy of the Dark Gods. Self-proclaimed Chaos Lord Matius of the Chosen of Kalendor consecrated the ground by executing the messenger who had just arrived. These SPARTANS were infuriating! They slinked in the shadows and retreated as soon as they engaged! Matius came to this world to battle Humans not Eldar!

How could the Chosen of the Dark Gods bring glory to their eternal patrons when the Enemy would not give open battle?

"Bring more slaves. It is time to pray for divine intervention." Matius roared as he walked into the new temple.

In the thick forests, a SPARTAN-III was watching the exchange through the scope of an empty sniper rifle. The child super-soldier dropped to the ground and slipped into the underbrush. After a circular route, the UNSC soldier reached the small camp where his Team was bunkered down.

"Report D-204." The Team Leader asked.

"There is a high value Chaos target at Barracks Green. Probable Commander."

The Spartan repressed her ire. They were too low on ammo to assault a

high value Chaos target. "Mark the location; we need to head to The Fridge."

The Fridge was not a single location. Instead, it was a network of hidden supply caches. One of the training exercises for prospective SPARTANS was to locate the caches. Team Khanda knew of a Fridge less than six miles from their current location. As they began to move out, the dread symphony of Onyx resumed.

Many miles away, Lt. Commander Kurt Ambrose was well aware of the tactical situation. Chaos forces were pushing the Spartans into an ever tighter perimeter. If the trend continued, the Spartan-IIIs would be forced into an open battle.

One they couldn't win.

The situation was even worse. Tom and Lucy had been spotted heading into the Forerunner structures to the west. If they secured Forerunner technology for Chaos the galaxy would be swept away in a tide of madness and death.

"Lt. Commander Ambrose, Chaos Forces are pushing on the Orphanage."

Endless Summer's announcement sent a shiver of near panic through the UNSC personnel.

"Kurt, what is the Orphanage?" Dr. Halsey feared the answer.

"It's the location where the prospective Spartans are sheltered." Ambrose growled. "Endless Summer, what are the closest assets to the Orphanage?"

"Teams Saber, Rapier and Scimitar are the closest Spartan Units. However, the Chaos Forces are highly mechanized and all my projections have the enemy reaching the Orphanage before even Team Rapier which is only sixteen miles from the Orphanage."

Sergeant Mendez cursed. "Chaos still has orbital superiority so we can't deploy in Falcons or Pelicans."

The UNSC personnel were scrambling to relocate assets and contain the possible Chaos Breakthrough. Endless Summer, the planet's AI, was reviewing some troubling data.

"We have another possible problem. I am detecting similar spatial disturbances to those that preceded the arrival of Chaos. In addition, Slipspace Ruptures are forming in the system."

Mendez looked up. "Incoming message! I'm putting it through. You won't believe what you're about to hear!"

"_UNSC Forces of Onyx, this is Chapter Master Khaba of the Celestial Lions. Stand fast! We shall be the burning meteors of humanity's wrath!"_

Geneva, Switzerland

Captain Ixxion of the Ultramarines stood before the communications hololith. The images of every Astartes officer on Earth appeared.

Brother-Sergeant Hollis was representing the Imperial Fists in the absence of Brother-Captain Thomas. Overall command of the Astartes taskforce was given to Chapter Master Romero of the Lamenters Chapter.

"Brother Astartes, I bid you welcome." Chapter Master Romero opened the conclave. "I have received word from the Custodes that our Emperor has successfully delayed the fleets of the Great Enemy. Are our forces in readiness?"

Captain Ixxion inclined his head as a show of respect to his fellow Astartes. "The Ultramarines are ready to defend Europe from the Great Enemy and the Xenos Covenant."

One of the servitors of the Ultramarines transmitted the information to the other Astartes. Captain Chartes of the Knight Brothers of Kadesh spoke next.

"My brothers have taken position at the key manufactoriums of Mars. The Knight Brothers stand ready to defend the Red Planet from the blasphemy of the Covenant and the Great Enemy."

Each of the Astartes commanders recounted their preparations and intoned the Litanies of Hate for the xenos and traitors seeking to defile Holy Terra. One by one, the connections were severed until only Captain Ixxion and Captain Angelos remained.

"Son of Guilliman, I did not expect you here." The Blood Ravens Captain said testily.

The Ultramarine returned the other Astarte's glare. "I would have expected a censure on your Chapter, Blood Raven. The actions of Azariah Kyras on Hokado IV reeked of sorcery."

"My Chapter has always dealt with suspicion, Ultramarine."

The connection was severed and Captain Ixxion ground his teeth. He did not trust the Blood Ravens, not after Azariah Kyras unleashed psychic powers that were not recorded in the Codex Astartes or the lesser tomes that guided the Chapters that did not fully embrace the teachings of Robute Guilliman such as the Space Wolves and Blood Angels. The Ultramarines were not concerned by Kyras using unfamiliar psychic powers. Occasionally, even the psychic might of Chief Librarian Tigurius manifested in unusual forms in times of great stress. Azariah Kyras had used the powers consistently and there was definitely a ritual behind each power. _That_ was the threat. The Enigma that led the Blood Ravens Chapter was using unsanctioned psychic powers.

Ixxion turned his focus away from the distant and enigmatic leader of the Blood Ravens. As he slid his plumed helmet into place, his mind wandered one last time.

Is the Emperor keeping the Blood Ravens close to show that they are free of taint? Or are they so close to prevent their heresy from spreading throughout the forces of the Imperium and UNSC?

Thousands of miles away, Captain Angelos strode down the halls of the Blood Ravens Castellum at Ayer's Rock. Librarian Rawiya joined his Captain.

"The Ultramarines have not abandoned their suspicions, Captain?"

The Captain of the Third Company shook his head. "No, they still harbor concerns about Chapter Master Kyras's new found abilities."

"My lord, do you not also harbor similar concerns about the Chapter Master?" Rawiya questioned his captain, which was a very rare occurrence for an Astartes.

"I have made no secrets of my concerns about Azariah ever since his return from the Judgment of Carrion. It is, however, an internal Blood Ravens matter and the Defenders of Macragge should respect the autonomy of a brother Chapter."

Rawiya held his tongue. He waited several moments before speaking to Gabriel again. "My Captain, our preparations are ready. The Company is ready to respond to any enemy incursion. I find myself wishing the Fourth Company had managed to join us."

"Indeed, Rawiya. We will have to carry out our objectives without the assistance of Captain Thule. The Chapter cannot afford to lose Sub-sector Aurelia to the predations of the Tyranids." Captain Angelos spoke with conviction.

The Librarian took a deep breath. "The auguries point towards the interference of the Eldar. Epistolary Jonas expressed concerns that Eldar infiltrators deposited Genestealers into Angel Forge."

Gabriel growled. "Damn those xenos witches! They continually interfere. Their time has passed. The galaxy belongs the Imperium of Man!"

Installation 05

The Scarab was dying. Despite the best efforts of the Arbiter, Sergeant Johnson and the rest of the Human and Elite forces the towering biomechanical war machine would not survive its mission. The Brutes and their allies had been too numerous; too fierce to completely fend off. However, the proud war machine refused to give in to the many wounds ravaging its form.

N'tho Sraom ran through the final checks. Satisfied, he activated the communications gear in the Assault Platform. "Arbiter, the weapon is at readiness."

"Well done, N'tho Sraom. The Brutes have barricaded the entrance and scans report several strong points on the other side."

Before the Sangheli could respond, Sergeant Johnson's voice joined the conversation. "Too bad for them, we've got the world's most pissed off doorbell."

The Scarab began to divert power into its main weapon. The focusing array bloomed like an enraged flower. Energy danced and waited to be unleashed.

"Knock knock, you hairy bastards." Sergeant Johnson growled as the titanic energies obliterated the armored door of the complex and

everything for nearly a hundred feet behind it.

"Breach established. We are moving ahead! Rejoin us as soon as you are able, Humans!" The Arbiter stated simply as he activated the afterburners of his Banshee.

Kenyon and the other human soldiers watched the Covenant fliers roar overhead. "I never thought I'd be pulling for an alien in a fight before."

Majalan kept his eyes skyward and watched for Brute Banshees. "Just don't make a habit of it."

High Charity

The Brutes shifted uncomfortable as the Prophet of Deception casually swirled his expensive wine. In the distance, the sounds of war and ruination droned on and on.

"Holy Prophet, your confidence in our abilities is a true blessing but we must evacuate this section of High Charity." The Brute Major spoke in reverent tones.

"I am unconcerned with the presence of the Flood." The Prophet said dismissively.

"Holy Prophet, they are forcing us to withdraw to a tighter defensive perimeter." Deception chuckled at the _fear_ the Jiralhanae were desperately trying to hide.

"Their ability to use the Human Slipspace Drive so efficiently was completely outside the scope of your warplans." Deception chided smugly.

"Holyâ€¦" The Brute Minor began to speak.

"Granted, they would have likely crashed into the outer wall if I hadn't provided the more complete algorithms to the Gravemind." The prophet sipped at the wine as he haughtily cut off the young Jiralhanae. "He was wise not to completely trust me. Though, I cannot blame him. After all, I am and have always been defined by misdirection and lies."

"You speak of heresy!" The captain shouted.

"Zealots." Deception sighed. "Heresy would imply that I subscribe to your belief system. I have merely been _using_ it for my own designs. And, I believe it is time to move on to other projects."

The Brutes drew their weapons. "We will not hesitate to bring you into custody, Prophet or no!"

Deception laughed. "Oh, you small little creatures." A dull golden light flooded the apartment and the minds of the Brutes were utterly destroyed. Their consciousness could not comprehend the golden Necrodermis shell of the utterly ancient and alien being before them. "A shame your minds were so completely shattered. It dulls the taste to the point of inedibility."

Two gaunt mechanical figures materialized at the ancient

abomination's side. The mechanical lifeforms raised their staves and obliterated the two gribbling Covenant soldiers in a flash of sickly green light.

"One act draws ever closer to completion and another begins. And so the dance goes on."

Elsewhere in High Charity

A shoal of Flood Infection forms scuttled across a distant wall. The air was heavy with Flood Spores. The insidious alien poison had made stealth nearly impossible for most of the Covenant species. Only the Uggnoy and Maglekgolo could survive in the choking haze now. The Kig-yar and Yanme'e were the first to fall. The diminutive Covenant species were especially vulnerable to the Flood. Even the mighty Jiralhanae had been reduced to seeking shelter in sterilized chambers. The Prophets' instruments could only travel in the pressurized safety of Phantoms or Spirits.

High Charity was no longer the capital of the Covenant. It was a Flood Hive.

"Chief! Truth has come to a complete stop! He's in the center of the city in a Forerunner vessel! I don't believe it! The Covenant has been using the vessel to power all of High Charity!" Cortana contacted John and ripped him away from his tactical appraisals.

John responded nonverbally and advanced down what was likely once a major thoroughfare. Now, it was strewn with the overgrown wreckage of Brute and Elite vehicles and heaving Flood tumors. Master Chief could clearly see the Brute defensive line in the distance. It was an oasis of order in a sea of corruption.

"Is the vessel prepped for launch?" Chief asked Cortana for a status report.

"It is. I'm doing everything I can to delay Truth, but there is a presence in the Forerunner vessel. It's ancient and fighting my intrusion attempts." The AI responded.

"Do everything you can." Chief stated and rushed along the path. He moved from cover to cover and minimized his profile the entire way. The SPARTAN paused at the edge of the bleeding edge of the defensive line. A number of Brutes were manning turrets and patrolling against any Flood incursions. The human super-soldier was running low on supplies, even those scavenged from dead Covenant warriors and the Flood.

Supplies were the least of his concerns. Time was a far more valuable commodity. Truth could escape on the Forerunner vessel at any moment.

The Shade Turrets were watching the approaches most likely to be used by the Flood. The Master Chief knew that the Flood had an instinctive grasp of tactics and would likely launch their next attack from an unexpected direction.

_That's what they're doing. _John-117 suddenly realized. _The Flood is executing a feint._

Master Chief would need to time his advance perfectly. If he attacked too soon, the Brutes would focus solely on Master Chief and allow the Flood to overrun the entire position. On the other hand, if he waited too late the Flood would arrive in force and ruin any chances of reaching Truth before he escaped.

The only option was to wait for the exact moment the Flood launched their attack.

"Cortana, I need an update on the Flood." John-117 contacted his AI companion.

The 'audio-only' icon appeared in the SPARTAN's HUD. "I have confirmed reports that six residential blocks have been overrun. Flood Combat and Carrier Form numbers now exceed twenty-nine million three-hundred thousand. I can't get a concrete number on Infection Form numbers, but I estimate it is in the, lowest estimates incoming, several hundred millions. It gets _worse._"

"The Flood's numbers have increased from a few hundred Combat and Infection forms to almost a billion in less than eight hours. How can it be _worse?_" John questioned a bit testily.

"I have catalogued three new Flood Combat Forms. These new Flood Forms do not require a host." Cortana reported.

"Have you declared Hydra?" Sierra-117 slipped behind a column to avoid a Brute Patrol.

The AI was silent for a moment. "Only recently. The Covenant's Information Warfare has fallen into disarray and I have just gained complete access. I have informed the UNSC and given clearance for the Imperium to see the data. There hasn't been a response." There was another pause. "Chief, there is a divisional strength Flood swarm headed toward your current location. It will arrive a few minutes before the Forerunner vessel is cleared for extraction."

"Understood Cortana. Sierra-117 out." The Master Chief cut the transmission and readied his limited arsenal for combat. The human super-soldier turned his attention to the ruined streets of High Charity. The horizon heaved as the Flood army raced towards the Brute firing line. A Lance of Wraith Tanks gracefully slid into position. The Plasma Mortars spat defiantly at the incoming mass of the Parasite.

Alas, the firing line was as effective as attempting to extinguish a star by spiting in its eye.

The first wave of Infection and Carrier forms scuttled into range of the Shade Turrets. The Jiralhanae fired into the thickly packed sea of corruption and decay.

Now! Master Chief exploded into motion. He bounded from his concealment and began to sprint toward the bridge of coherent light. A pair of Brutes saw the oncoming SPARTAN and moved to intercept.

"The Demon has revealed himself! Protect the Hierarchy!" One of the Brutes cried out. John rolled out of the line of fire. The sound of

spike rounds deflecting off the supply coffin could barely be heard over the raging battle at the firing line. Master Chief readied his own Spike Rifle and Plasma Rifle. The SPARTAN leaned out of cover and placed a trio of spike rounds through the eyes of one of the Brutes. The second Brute was staggered by a Plasma volley.

There isn't enough time. Sierra-117 berated himself and charged. Chief used the combat blades of the Spiker to gut the Jiralhanae. Master Chief was moving with all due haste and did not spare the fallen Brute a second glance. He rushed up a ramp and followed the curved path to the gravity tether connecting the Forerunner vessel to High Charity. Out of the corner of his eye, John saw thousands of Flood Forms pour over the barricade.

Cortana materialized in a holo-projector. "This is it Chief!" John reached down to retrieve Cortana, but the AI shook her head. "I have to stay. I have to continue to delay the departure. If I stop now, the ship will depart."

It was strange to see strain on the face of the Smart Construct. "I'll come back. I'll extract you."

"Don't make a girl a promiseâ€¦ If you know you can't keep it." Cortana was smiling, but it was a distant and false smile. "Go, that's an order Master Chief Petty Officer."

The decades of military conditioning asserted themselves and Master Chief nodded in acknowledgement. The SPARTAN took a running leap and was catapulted through the Gravity Tether. Cortana had evidently lost the battle against the mysterious presence on the Forerunner vessel and the mighty starship began to detach itself from High Charity. The Gravity Tethers began to fall away. Sierra-117 was thrown like a discarded toy into the Forerunner ship. It took nearly five seconds before John stopped skidding. He righted himself and selfishly spared a look to where Cortana maintained her lonely vigil.

"Godspeed, SPARTAN." The Chief received and acknowledged the final, forlorn transmission.

Installation 05

The Arbiter and his fellow Sangheli disembarked from the Banshees and prepped their weapons. Each Sangheli was eager to claim vengeance against the Jiralhanae and the Prophets for the betrayal of the Covenant.

"Brothers, my Active Camouflage was damaged earlier in our campaign upon this Tainted Ring. We shall turn this to our advantage. Follow in my wake," The Arbiter commanded. His order and stratagem was understood instantaneously. The Sangheli fighting alongside the Arbiter were veterans of hundreds of campaigns and had slain hundreds, or in some cases thousands, of enemies. The Arbiter entered the ruined hallway leading towards the Control Room. N'tho Sraomee had proven to be an adequate commander of the Assault Platform. The Arbiter would see that the young warrior would receive the proper training rites. N'tho had incredible potential as the master of an Assault Platform.

The other Sangheli activated their active camouflage and took their positions. The Arbiter reached the door and steeled his resolve. Time

itself seemed to slow as the former K'xon Rtau advanced. A squad of Brutes emerged from the Control Room of the Sacred Ring.

"Kill the Arbiter! The Chieftain must complete his holy work!" The Brute Captain bellowed as he led the charge. The Arbiter noted the disparate weapons used by the Brute pack. Several Brutes were using the Jiralhanae-modified Plasma Rifles. Others were using indigenous Jiralhanae designs. The Arbiter noted with some surprise that one of the Jiralhanae was wielding a human shotgun.

Now was not the time for speculation. Now was the time to kill. The Arbiter immediately opened fire with his Plasma Rifle. The Jiralhanae gave voice to their hate and returned fire. The Arbiter's shields took several hits, but held. Suddenly, there was a moment of precise violence. The Brute Captain and the two Brute Majors carrying Brute Shots were beheaded by Honor Blades. The remaining Brutes were brought down by sustained weapons fire.

"The Jiralhanae are not our only foe! Time itself is arrayed against us," The Arbiter commanded. The Elites accompanying the Arbiter fell in as they approached the entrance to the Library.

"The Libraryâ€¦I never believed I would see such a sacred place," one of the Sangheli said in awe.

"It will be our graves if we cannot stop Tartarus from lighting the Ring," The Arbiter barked. "And as we stand here, he draws ever closer to killing us all."

The Elites acknowledged their leader and followed him into the final corridor. A moment passed as the Arbiter stood on the precipice. The reckoning that would decide the fate of the Covenant waited on the other side of the door.

There could be no hesitation.

K'xon Rtau stepped through the door flanked by his brothers. Tartarus and his High Chieftains were standing at a console. The Human Shipmaster, the daughter of Keyes, was being berated by Tartarus.

"It is a simple thing, human! Take the index and place it in the Reciptical!" The Chieftain of the Jiralahane growled.

"Please treat the Index with respect! It is a vital component for ensuring that the Installation fires within the prescribed parameters!" Guilty Spart 343 pleaded.

"Tartarus," The Arbiter said with a cold fury. Tartarus turned and scoffed.

"The Arbiter, how it pains me that you are alive," The grey-maned Jiralhanae growled. "How many of my brethren have you murdered this day?"

"**My** people must be avenged," The Arbiter shot back. "The Jiralhanae will be spared if you step aside and allow our retribution against the Prophets. You and your species need not follow the Hierarchs' lies."

"Even now, you seek to deny my people our destiny. The Great Journey is at Hand!" Tartarus roared and forced Miranda Keyes to place the Index into place. The Forerunner Console flared to life. Ancient machines activated seamlessly. The thousands of years of inactivity had no effect on the clinical precision of Forerunner engineering. "The Jiralhanae will be the Prophets' Vanguard! Not your mongrel race!"

The Brutes took up their Chieftain's roar of triumph as a powerful energy field activated around Tartarus. Elites and Brutes were primed for bloody combat when the tense silence was shattered by a single order.

"First rank fire! Second rank fire!" Sergeant Kolak bellowed. The humans had arrived and wasted no time in engaging the Brutes. Three High Chieftains fell to concentrated las and assault rifle fire. Another was brained by a single shot from Sergeant Johnson's confiscated Beam Rifle. Plasma fire from both the Elites and Maljan decimated the final High Chieftain. Tartarus roared as he jumped away. He landed on the Firing Platform of Installation Five. The Elites followed in the wake of the Chieftain.

Commander Keyes wheeled around to the Forerunner AI. "How the hell do we stop the firing process?"

"Stop it? Why? The Firing Mechanism of Installation Zero-Five will efficiently end the threat of Flood Expansion. There have been nearly three billion, seven hundredâ€¦" Guilty Spark began to explain.

"Horus's black heart! Tell us how to shut this damn ring off!" Kenyon snapped. 343 Guilty Spark huffed like a petulant child.

"I say! You are demanding Reclaimers. But, if you must abort the Firing Mechanism, simply removing the Index will force the Installation into Standby Mode," Guilty Spark explained.

"I'm on it!" Miranda started to move towards the Firing Platform.

"Not yet, ma'am. Wait until that Big Ape is dead," Sergeant Johnson counseled. Miranda started to protest when Sergeant Keller nodded.

"Respectfully, ma'am, I have to agree with Sergeant Johnson," Keller agreed.

"Then, sergeants, engage the enemy," Miranda ordered crisply.

"Don't have to tell us twice, ma'am," Maljan responded first and rushed to the edge of the ledge. Sergeant Johnson pulled even with the Imperial Guardsmen.

"Son, as soon as you have a clear shot, take it," Johnson ordered.

"Sir, I'd take the shot even if it meant hitting one of those split-lipped xenos bastards," the Guardsmen replied after checking the remaining charge on the Plasma Gun.

"Good man," Avery said approvingly as he tracked the Brute leader through the apocalyptic melee unfolding below him.

On the Firing Platform, the Arbiter rolled underneath a devastating swing of the Fist of Rukh. The massive gravity hammer impacted on one of the Firing Platform's supports and, to the shock of both the humans and Elites, actually left a dent in the Forerunner alloy.

The roar of plasma fire momentarily overwhelmed the ancient mechanisms preparing Delta Halo to fire. Tartarus was actually knocked off his feet by the impact. Two Elites followed up the human attack with one of their own. Unfortunately, the shield protecting the Chieftain of the Jiralhanae did not falter. Tartarus wielded the Fist of Rukh like a spear and crushed the chest of one of the attacking Elites. The Elite was thrown like a rag doll. Tartarus followed up the vicious attack with a wide horizontal swing that pulped the second Sangheli's head.

"Our destiny will not be denied! Glory to the Prophets! Glory to the Covenant!" Tartarus roared as he charged from his position. The Jiralhanae barreled into the Arbiter and knocked the Sangheli leader from his feet. K'xon slashed at his foe with his Honor Blade, but the energy field protecting Tartarus turned aside the strike. Tartarus lifted the Fist of Rukh high and prepared to finish off his opponent.

"Ascension!" Tartarus shouted in religious ecstasy. Before he could finish off the Arbiter, a cascade of fire erupted from the Human position. Tartarus was staggered by the sheer volume of laser, bullet and plasma fire. The Arbiter rose to his feet while Tartarus was occupied.

"Lights out, King Kong," Sergeant Johnson yelled as he fired his beam rifle. The UNSC sergeant had been observing Tartarus's shield. He had located the generator's location on the Fist of Rukh. The shot hit its mark and the energy field collapsed. Tartarus gaped in utter disbelief.

"Sanghelios!" The Arbiter cried out as his Honor Blade pierced Tartarus's chest. K'xon Rtau would take no chances and ripped his blade downward. The Chieftain dropped his ancient gravity hammer and stumbled backwards.

"My Jiralhanaeâ€¦forgive me," Tartarus whispered as he collapsed.

Miranda Keyes was moving before the Jiralhanae had hit the ground. She was leaping between rotating platforms and focusing prisms. 343 Guilty Spark was hovering in the distance and pleading with Miranda to be careful. The AI construct was not concerned for the safety of the human naval officer, but instead for the delicate, by Forerunner standards, focusing prisms.

"Stupid machine," Miranda muttered under her breath and blinked away the beads of sweat rolling down her forehead. The commander ducked under a low outcropping before catching a glimpse of the Index. Time was truly her enemy. In desperation, Miranda leapt to the lower platform and landed in an awkward roll. Commander Keyes bolted forward and rushed the location of the Index. She hastily removed the Index.

343 Guilty Spark floated over to Miranda and looked at the now deactivated console. "I must say, you Reclaimers have a flare for the dramatic. If you had dallied, the Installation would have successfully fired."

"What is happening now?" Sergeant Kolak asked as he gazed at a holographic display showing each of the surviving Halo Installations.

"In the event of an aborted activation, all Installations will enter standby status and await commands from the Ark," Guilty Spark divulged.

The Arbiter approached the humans and the Oracle. "And where, pray tell Oracle, is that?"

* * *

><p>Author's Note Round 2: Ladies, Gentlemen and fellow neckbeards, I present Chains of the Kindred Chapter 20! It certainly has taken a while, but what's almost an entire year between friends. I really don't have an excuse for the long wait and hopefully the next wait won't be anywhere near as long.

Please review! That really helps. The recent reviews from Kasrkin-Ghost, Templar627 and desodus really helped me pump out the finale of this chapter.

21. Chapter 21

Paris, France

Humanity was on the brink of annihilation. However, humanity was a tenacious and stubborn species and refused to submit to fate. Instead, the UNSC and Imperium had decided to secure a future for their species even if the unthinkable should happen. Humanity was preparing to evacuate millions of civilians, vast amounts of cultural and historical artifacts, and a large portion of humanity's collected knowledge to an isolated region of the Galaxy the Imperium called the Halo Stars.

Fate, it seemed, had a sense of irony.

The region of the Milky Way Galaxy humanity planned to flee to shared its name with the very Forerunner Constructs that were the knife at the throat of the galaxy.

Lieutenant Garrison of the UNSC Army's Military Police emerged from his transport and grimaced. He was furious on several levels. Garrison was furious at his orders from taking him away from Earth when the Homeworld needed every available soldier to defend it. He was furious at the Covenant, Chaos, the Insurrectionists and all the other threats to humanity. In just over fifty years of constant war, humanity's population had been decimated. The refugee camps on the few remaining Inner Colonies and Earth were woefully overcrowded.

"Papa? Papa!" The shout barely cleared the droning of engines and the

shuffling refugee queue. Garrison's head whipped around as he saw a small girl rush from the queue. An Imperial Naval Armsman tried to grab the girl, but missed. Garrison's fury melted away as the girl hugged his leg.

"Amelia, what are you doing here?" Garrison felt his voice break in relief. He may have not wanted to leave on the eve on the Battle of Earth, but he certainly didn't want his family to face the horrors of the Covenant and Chaos.

"Momma say's we're going on vacation," Amelia laughed as her father picked her up.

"We are," the Military Policeman lied with a nod. Garrison would not strip his daughter of her innocence and expose her to the unholy truths of the Milky Way.

"And I'm actually going to ride on a space ship!" Amelia said excitedly. Garrison nodded, both at his daughter's enthusiasm, and the approaching Armsman.

"I'm sorry, Armsman. My daughter just got excited seeing me. I haven't been home in three months," the Lieutenant explained.

"That may be, but we must maintain order," the Armsman said curtly.

"My daughter won't be an issue," Garrison assured the Imperial. "I'll take Ameila back to her mother now."

"Make it quick, the Refugee Fleet has to be out-system as soon as possible. We can't be caught by the Great Enemy or the Covenant," the Armsman said with just a hint of panic.

Garrison nodded and carried his daughter back to his wife. Katherine did not waste any time in embracing her husband.

"I missed you Sam," Katherine whispered. "Do you know where we are going?"

"Far, far away. I heard an Imperial call it the 'Halo Stars'. It is on the opposite side of the Core from the Orion Arm and it," Sam responded.

"It?" Katherine asked nervously.

"Something highly classified," the Lieutenant said fearfully.

"Covenant?" Katherine followed up.

"Worse," Sam said quietly.

"Begin boarding!" An Imperial said over an amplified vocaster. The shambling queue lurched forward and the refugees streamed forward into an uncertain future.

Orbital MAC Station 'Bermuda'

"The transport just checked in," Lt. Aljehandro Coyoc reported to

Captain Bucholtz.

"Clearance granted for FTL jump. Tell them Godspeed. They have to get out system before the Covenant and Chaos arrive," Bucholtz said authoritatively.

"Aye, aye sir," Aljehandro said crisply before relaying the commands to the waiting Imperial Colony vessel.

Bucholtz watched the enormous Imperial vessels broke orbit. The vessels were surrounded by a cloud of Imperial escort craft and UNSC frigates.

"It makes you uneasy, doesn't it?" Lt. Coyoc asked as he watched the transports prepare for Warp Transit.

"That the Imperials go through Hell for their FTL?" Captain Bucholtz asked. Aljehandro nodded. "Yeah, Slipspace may be a dangerous place, but at least it isn't Hell."

"The Imperials have been using that Faster-than-light travel for about as long as we've known about metal working. I think the convoys will be fine, sir."

"I pray you are right, Lt. Coyoc," Bucholtz grimaced. "As soon as the transports make the transition to the Warp, I want you to double our sweeps for Slipspace Wake."

"Aye, aye sir," Coyoc transmitted the commands to the transports. The massive colony vessels acknowledged the orders. Coyoc watched in somewhat morbid fascination as several smaller vessels, Imperial Escorts and UNSC frigates, attached themselves to the multi-mile long vessels like lampreys. Aljehandro caught the disturbing imagery and remembered what Commander Kale of the Imperial Navy had said during his briefing.

"As you are exposed to the Warp, even peripherally, you will notice several side-effects. These effects can be anything from an ever-present itch, disturbing thoughts, or other minor effects. Those who are more sensitive may experience more intense symptoms. These can range from physical illness, spiritual illness or even permanent insanity."

Aljehandro had doubted, and had even mocked after a few beers, the Imperial briefing. Now, he shivered at his previous doubt. This was a mere glimpse of the Warp filtered through Gellar Fields, titanium, and distance.

'If it is this intense during a routine Warp Transit what in God's Name will the Chaos invasion be like?'

Aljehandro realized the scope of the war to come and he despaired.

Onyx

Stealth had long since been abandoned. The necessities of protecting The Orphanage outweighed any benefits that stealth could offer. Team Scimitar was the closest team to the Orphanage and was determined to protect their youngest allies. The SPARTANs did not give voice to the

images of horror filling their minds. It was best not to think of the degradations Chaos would unleash.

"Six kilometers! Move it people!" the raspy voice of Scimitar lead barked over the radio channel. The other SPARTAN-IIIs acknowledged with standard radio clicks. Onyx was unnaturally quiet. The war's symphony of death, madness and destruction was absent.

"Contact on motion sensor," Tobias-G142 reported mechanically.

"Whatever it is, it's coming from the east," Greta-G023 added.

"Still no sat-coverage," Ilsa-G091 reported.

Greta nodded at her squad and they began to move out, but in a far more defensive formation. It would not save them. Tobias barely had a chance to shout "Incoming," before he was completely destroyed by enemy fire. Greta had lost her first soldier. There was no subtlety in the attack. It was born of rage and an eternal hatred. Mechanically, she noted that the weapon was likely a Chaotic bolter. The Celestial Lions had managed to send some information from their Battle Barge while tearing through the Chaos Fleet in orbit.

"**For the Dark Gods!**" The Chaos Space Marine cried as it ran clear through a pine-like tree. The Chaos Space Marine was a thing of madness and bloodlust. Scimitar opened fire, but their carbines lacked the power to even annoy the Fallen Astartes.

Greta nearly wretched, in spite of her mental conditioning and training, when she realized the right arm of the Chaos Marine was a fusion of the mechanical and biological. It was a nightmarish bladed thing. A foul fluid pulsed through translucent veins that attached to a silvered blade. Worse, the end of the arm was, in fact, a toothy snapping maw.

The clarity of training, of purpose, suddenly flooded Greta's mind. The arm was a weakness that could be exploited.

"Scimitar team! Fire on the arm! Fire on the god-damn arm!"

She may have rediscovered an island of clarity and sanity, but the Chaos Space Marine was still the embodiment of terror and revulsion.

Scimitar team managed to push past their terror and fire. Several rounds hit vulnerable areas on the Chaos Space Marine. Once again, Greta felt a wave of fear wash over her. The Chaos Space Marine _and_ its arm both howled in pain for a moment. However, instead of raging at the pain, the Chaos Astartes _reveled in it_.

"**This pain exalts Slaanesh! My endurance exalts Nurgle! My plots of vengeance exalt Tzeentch! And when I drink of your hearts, I will exalt Khorne!**"

The Chaos Marine closed the distance faster than any member of Scimitar could imagine. It was even faster than the Elites that had butchered Greta's homeworld. Ilsa swung her MA5K carbine in desperation, but the clumsy strike missed. The Chaos Marine spun out

of the way and followed through with a wide horizontal strike. Ilisa's head was claimed in the name of the Dark Gods. The Chaos Marine's bolter barked out a pair of shots. Rodger, who Greta had always joked only, knew how to say 'Yes sir/ma'am' and 'No sir/ma'am' was blown nearly in half by the bolt round. Nicolai had his arm blown off by the Chaos warrior's shot.

Greta screamed and poured her last magazine into the Astarte's arm. The next sound she heard was the tearing of metal and flesh. The young SPARTAN screamed as the Chaos Marine lifted her to eye level. Strangely, she quickly lost feeling around the area where the Chaos Astartes had impaled her.

"**Witness the TRUTH of Chaos!**" The Astartes ripped his mutated arm clear of Greta's ruined torso. Greta was bleeding out very fast. She lost consciousness for an indeterminate amount of time. The Chaos Marine's chanting ripped her back to the nightmarish present. Greta's bleeding had not slowed, but an unnatural awareness had filled her being. The SPARTAN-III noticed she was at the center of a crude circle.

A crude circle made with the remains of her team.

Greta screamed as a pulse of raw energy erupted from the ground beneath her. Her last conscious memory was of the energy flowing into the Chaos Marine. Her physical body died within seconds. Tragically, her immortal soul did not. Instead, it entered the realms of Chaos. Greta's arrival did not go unnoticed and an eternity of unspeakable torment began.

The Chaos Marine shrieked his adulation of his Gods as the taint of the Warp engulfed him. In seconds, his mortal frame ran like wax and he was changed. His mind had been torn down after hundreds of years of service to Chaos. The destruction of his will left the Marine little more than a shell filled with devotion to the Dark Gods.

His will was insufficient to sustain his sapience. In a word, he shattered. The Marine ceased to be a proud Astartes warrior. Instead, he was little more than an animal. His form was unrecognizable as even formerly being human. The former Astartes superficially resembled a hound. It was a fitting transformation. He had always lived as a hunting beast for his Dark Masters. Now that truth was as literal as it was figurative. The semi-mindless beast detected new prey.

His new purpose drove him forward.

UNSC Mining Orbital, Alpha Centauri

Inquisitor Jacques de Loreant and Sister Theresa of the Order Pronatus of the Adepta Sororitas silently entered the main conference room of the UNSC orbital. The conference room was filled with representatives of all the major religions of the UNSC, the Imperial Ecclesiarchy, several museum curators, and other guardians of Humanity's cultural and spiritual artifacts. In addition, Captain Spann of the UNSC Army and Captain Najjar of the Imperial Guard were present to safeguard the treasured relics of mankind.

"We have little time, so I will skip the hollow platitudes," the Inquisitor said harshly. "The task of protecting humanity's most

ancient and revered cultural and religious treasures has fallen to us. The enemies of Man seek to utterly extinguish the light of Mankind. The Great Enemy and the foul Covenant desire our complete destruction. They seek to _erase us_. The God-Emperor and UNSC High Command have ordered us to defend the relics of Mankind with our very lives."

"What of us that have sworn oaths of non-violence?" The Dalai Lama asked.

The Inquisitor grimaced in barely-controlled disgust. "You will be taken to the Reliquary. You will be protected along with the Sacred _Relics_."

"Inquisitor," Captain Spann began, uneasy at de Loreant's title. "Will a pair of companies be enough to hold the mines? The briefing materials made it clear that the bulk of Chaos will strike directly at Earth. The Covenant, however, might attempt to establish a secure forward operating base here for repair and mustering reinforcements."

"An astute question," Jacques responded. "The God-Emperor has taken steps to assist in our defense. I have received a message directly from his Custodes that He in His Mercy has altered the Warp Currents surrounding this system. The Warp does not directly affect Slipspace under normal circumstances. However, a Warp Swell of considerable force can make Slipspace travel risky. Attacking Alpha Centauri would be too much of a risk."

Spann nodded, but was unconvinced. The meeting continued and eventually the Inquisitor dismissed everyone. Captain Spann took the opportunity to approach Captain Najjar.

"Captain Najjar, it's a pleasure to finally speak to you," Captain Spann greeted and extended his hand. Najjar looked at the hand for a moment before taking it. The Imperial captain was a bear of a man. Spann was a tall man at around six foot four. However, Najjar was nearly four inches taller. Najjar responded in a strange language that Spann could not understand.

"Captain Najjar thanks you for your welcome. He looks forward to protecting such holy relics alongside you," a far shorter man wearing a red sash over what appeared to be a dress uniform translated.

"You're welcome," Spann replied uncertainly. "I don't believe we have been introduced either, sir."

"I am Commissar Dabir Madani," the officer bowed. "Captain Najjar is from the world of Thariq. They speak a very rare dialect of Gothic. I will act as translator."

"Thank youâ€¦Commissar," Spann had not shaken his uncertainty. The communication difficulties would make the defense of the relics very difficult.

"Do not thank me yet, Captain Spann. Thank me when we have achieved victory," the Commissar said bluntly.

"To be completely honest, I'd rather be back on Earth," Spann

responded. "That is the real battle. Yes, these are treasured artifacts, but they should have been sent with the evacuation fleet. Why send them here?"

Madani gave Spann an appraising look and rested his hand on his bolt pistol. "A question I have wondered myself. However, we have our orders." He quickly translated the conversation to Captain Najjar. The enormous Guard captain said something quickly.

"Captain Najjar shares our curiosity but wishes to remind us that we have a purpose and with faith in the God-Emperor it shall be revealed," Dabir translated.

"We'll see. I think we need to go over defensive plans with our companies. I have an idea that will _hopefully_ keep the Covenant from simply glassing us from orbit."

Forerunner Ship in Slipspace Transit

Stealth was his ally now. He was outnumbered, outgunned, was coming dangerously close to being outmaneuvered. Master Chief had fallen back on an instinctive knowledge he _knew_ shouldn't be possible. The SPARTAN possessed an innate ability to use Forerunner or Forerunner-based technology. It was almost as if the knowledge was hard-wired into his very DNA.

However, that was a question for another time. A time after the War. A time after he got Cortana back.

Now, he had one focus. John was going to cripple the Covenant's command structure. The Prophet of Truth would die.

A part of John-117, a part he had grown to fear after his encounter with Khorne's Daemon, hoped to finish Truth as brutally as he finished Regret. Master Chief refocused on his mission and continued to stalk an Uggnoy Patrol. He was running dangerously low on supplies. The Grunts were returning to a barracks facility. Most were happily chatting about the food nipple. Chief, however, was hoping there would be some kind of weapons locker in the barracks. The Brute overseer had just left his charges in disgust. Now, Chief mused, was the best time to strike.

Chief slipped into the Grunts' hovel and moved amongst the inebriated Grunts. He didn't kill any of the Uggnoy. Instead, he found a weapons locker that was left opened by the trashed cannon fodder.

'_This is like Christmas,'_ the ghost of Cortana's presence whispered in his mind. John had never celebrated any religious festivity, and with his exposure to the horrid religions of Chaos and the Covenant, he likely never would. But in this case he definitely agreed with what Cortana would have said. The locker held a pair of Fuel Rod Cannons, Needlers, and plenty of ammo for both weapon types.

Suddenly, a flash of anger and revulsion filled John's mind. He mechanically went to work setting up a crude detonator in the weapons locker. Master Chief had not used with technique in seven years.

Not since Draco III.

Not since walking through the hellish landscape of mass graves full of murdered human civilians and feasting Jackals. The SPARTANs and other UNSC personnel had shown no mercy. Mercy had never even occurred to them. It had been a total and complete slaughter.

'_The Imperium would have appreciated the fires we tossed the dead Covenant onto,'_ Spartan-117 thought.

Draco-III had affected him deeply. If it wasn't for the intensive indoctrination and mental conditioning, John would have likely been driven mad by what he had seen. He remembered the embodiment of anger and vengeance Colonel Richard Wright had become after Draco III.

It shook John to the core at the sudden realization. However, the SPARTAN did not allow himself to pause and consider that Richard, who had been in Mombasa when Chaos had arrived, may have been embraced the Dark Gods.

'_I don't have time for theology,'_ John chided himself and broke into a run as his HUD revealed that his IED was about to go off.

Once again, John slipped into the shadows and resumed his hunt.

The _Primarch's Vengeance_ in Warp Transit

Captain Thomas approached Chief Librarian Casimiro. The Howling Griffons psyker opened his eyes as the Imperial Fists Captain approached the barrier separating the Specularius Navigo from the rest of the bridge.

"The Astronomicon exists," Casimiro said in lieu of a greeting.

"Only the Emperor can create the Astronomicon," Captain Thomas challenged.

"That is an immutable truth, Captain. Recently, however, there was a flare of psychic might I have never experienced before. The Emperor must have revealed himself to guide Humanity through this trial," the Chief Librarian explained. The Astartes, still clad in Terminator armor, deactivated the numerous psychic and mundane safeguards before exiting the cramped chamber.

"How soon shall we return to Terra?" Captain Thomas asked impatiently. The great enemies of Man were gathering for an assault on the cradle of the Imperium and the entire species. He could not live with the shame or betrayal of not fighting on the front-lines as his Emperor's foes arrived.

"Terra is on a war-footing. They should be making contact with us soon," Casimiro answered. "As for real-space transition? Within the next two hours if the Warp Currents remain favorable."

Captain Thomas spent the next hour attending to his battle-brothers, wargear and the soldiers of the Guard and UNSC Marine Corps. The Imperial Fists had long prided themselves on their connection to the entirety of the Imperium. They may have been transformed into gene-altered supermen that stood apart from the teeming masses of humanity, but they never forgot that they served and protected the

Imperium as a whole.

Warin also had a great deal of respect for the survivors of Halo. They had fought tenaciously and survived in the face of near-impossible odds.

"Commissar Halvorsen," the deep voice of the Astartes echoed in the corridor. "I would speak with you."

The Commissar had been reviewing the roster of surviving and injured soldiers when he heard the Astartes approach. He quickly put aside that task and rushed to the Astartes side.

"Yes, my lord?"

"I have spoken with Chief Librarian Casimiro. Constant Astropathic communication with Terra should be established soon. In addition, the real-space transition should commence within an hour."

The Commissar bowed as he received the news. "That will lift the spirits of our men, my lord."

"The UNSC Marines and Guardsmen fought with valor and skill. They deserved an update. We shall need their valor and prowess before the end," Thomas said with a quick nod. The Astartes departed without another word spoken. The Commissar was not insulted; on the contrary, he was greatly honored. The Howling Griffons had barely acknowledged the existence of the 'merely human' warriors on board their ship. The Imperial Fists, on the other hand, were far more accessible.

Commissar Halvorsen returned to 'his' soldiers and informed them of the news. As the morale officer spoke to the Marines and Guardsmen, Captain Thomas rejoined Captain Gregori on the bridge of the Strike Cruiser.

"Transmit the Howling Griffon's identification information," Gregori ordered. The Astropath bowed deeply and scurried off to carry out the Astartes Captain's orders.

The Howling Griffons officer turned to his counterpart. "Terra has made contact. They are grateful for our arrival, but they are proceeding with caution."

"It is a prudent course of action. We are, after all, heading into a Primaris Warzone," the Imperial Fist pointed out.

"Forgive my intrusion, lords," the unnamed Astropath spoke up. The two Astartes captains turned to the man. "Terra has acknowledged our identification codes. High Command wishes for us to head for Luna and to prepare a roster of our forces and munitions needs."

"Serf, is there any news of the Imperial Fists?" Thomas asked before the skittish psyker could rush off.

"High Command mentioned that there is a substantial Astartes force on Terra and Mars, but they did not reveal details of the individual chapters, my lord." The man handed off a printout to Captain Gregori before returning to the sanctuary of his choir.

"It seems we arrived before the bulk of our foes," Gregori rejoiced as he read the printout.

"Good, I always preferred destroying the Emperor's foes with my sword over fleets." Thomas felt his helmet seal into place and took comfort in the autosenses that flared to life.

"Strange for the Master of the Fleets," Captain Gregori pointed out.

"The Imperial Fists respect Guilliman's Codex, but we follow the traditions of our own Primarch as well. Honored Dorn appointed the Captain of the Second Company as the Master of the Fleet. My title is Master of the Marches."

Gregori nodded. "I forgot that not all chapters are descended from the Ultramarines."

"If I may take my leave, Brother-Captain?" Thomas bristled somewhat at the slight.

The Howling Griffons Captain nodded. Thomas strode from the bridge and made his way to his brothers. The Imperial Fists Combat Squad rose to their feet as the captain entered their small sanctuary.

"Brothers, our next battle awaits. As our Primarch-Progenitor, Rogal Dorn, defended Holy Terra from the forces of the Arch-traitor, we will defend Terra from the forces of Chaos and the Covenant. So long as one Imperial Fist draws breath on the soil of Terra, the homeworld of Mankind shall never fall."

Bern, Switzerland

Colonel Gryta had positioned her regiment throughout the city. She was currently in a UNSC modular Barracks that had dropped just outside the city. The 4th Ersawi Regiment was dug in throughout the city. Colonel Gryta was glad that the UNSC engineers and Adeptus Mechanicus had reinforced the city's subway system as best they could and installed several modular shelters throughout the city. Bern wouldn't be the target that Geneva would be, but there was always the chance that Covenant or Chaos raiding forces would strike the city.

Then there was the odd feeling Gryta could not shake.

The Ersawi officer was certain there was something in this city that held some significance. It was gnawing on her sanity.

'I am going to check some of the other shelters,' Elsa decided. She decided to travel amongst the tunnels and secured paths. Nominally, it was a standard sweep. Colonel Gryta stopped at various checkpoints and talked with her Guardswomen and the UNSC troopers. She managed to keep her composure, and no one had an inkling of her growing unease.

Elsa felt her heart leap out of her chest as she entered a make-shift shrine to the God-Emperor. The relief of being in such a sanctified place was palpable. Elsa Gryta felt her unease ebb and she could breathe again.

"What is my purpose here?" The Colonel whispered to the small silver Aquila.

"Our purpose is to serve the Will of Our Emperor," a man's gravelly voice filtered into the chamber. Elsa whirled around and drew her bolt pistol. The man's reverence to the Emperor did not pull her off her guard.

"I am Colonel Elsa Gryta," the Guardswoman began.

"Of the 4th Ersawi Lancers Regiment," a second voice flitted through the small chamber. The Colonel tightened her grip on the bolt pistol and was a single thought away from pulling the trigger.

The man who had been the first to speak reached into his pocket and produced a small icon. It was a strange faux-marble 'I' with a metal skull in the center.

"Do you recognize this?" The man questioned.

Elsa felt the grip on her pistol slacken involuntarily. "I-I've heard rumors."

"Good, that means we have been sufficiently discreet. Your theory is correct. I am Inquisitor Trireus Agmar of the Holy Ordos," Agmar said formally.

"My regiment has never faltered in our faith or in our duty," Gryta responded with all the courage and defiance she could muster.

Agmar walked past the still armed Colonel and signed the Aquila at the small shrine. "Of that, the Inquisition has never had cause for investigation. Ah, but you must be wondering the 'whys' and 'whats'."

"I-I am curious," Gryta cast a glance at the very androgynous figure standing in the shadows. The person had to be a psyker of some kind.

"Did you truly believe that passing through the Anomaly would have no effects? Even though the God-Emperor Himself shielded the Faithful, that much Warp Exposure had a profound impact on many individuals. You were one such individual," Agmar explained.

He watched as Gryta lowered her bolt pistol. The shock had shattered all of her proud resistance.

"Do not overly fear my intentions; we are not going to censure you or remove you from command. My purpose comes from the God-Emperor Himself," Agmar continued. He motioned to one of his agents. A short, wide man wearing carapace armor strode quickly to his master's side. He produced a small item from a pouch. Agmar accepted the item and approached Gryta.

"This is a Forerunner device," Agmar announced without ceremony or context. Gryta, however, instinctively knew she should accept the item. The Guard officer held the small device in her hands for a moment. She ran her finger along a small glyph-ridge on the device. In an instant, she divined the small device's function. Elsa

activated the device and encased Inquisitor Agmar in a containment field.

"What has happened to me?" Elsa demanded.

Behind the energy shield, Agmar smiled. "You have conquered the Geas the Forerunners placed upon us. They sought to control and direct us, but Humanity is a flame. We are power and can be guided, but ultimately answer to no one other than our own destiny and will. You are evidence of this."

"I will not be a specimen to be studied in a lab," Elsa had regained her composure and purpose. The fact she was being targeted by several weapons was actually a comfort. It was familiar.

"Of course not," Agmar assured her. "You will be the wind that guides the flames of Humanity's purification of the Galaxy. The Forerunners had no idea what they have granted our species. They have assured Humanity's dominance for all time!"

Sydney, Australia

Oracle Master Yeur was standing in a small room the humans had provided. On the surface, they were merely 'protecting' him from 'vengeful' elements. The truth was he was in a convenient location for observation and interrogation. He was meditating on the nature of duty and order when the door opened.

"The Emperor and the UNSC Security council demand your presence, xenos," one of the Imperium's Space Marines ordered. Yeur took in the impressive warrior. He wore ornate blood-red armor. The Space Marine carried a massive hammer that, on a very basic level, resembled the Jiralhanae's gravity hammers. However, the human hammer was far less aesthetically distasteful.

"Of course," Yeur replied as he rose to his feet. "You have the air of conquest about you. Would you honor me with your name?"

The Space Marine nodded. "I am Captain Gabriel Angelos of the Blood Ravens."

"Very well, Captain Gabriel Angelos. I shall accompany you," the Elite replied. The Astartes did not speak again, but led Yueh out of his small holding area. A pair of human demons wearing the heaviest armor the Elite had ever seen joined the procession.

Eventually, Yeur entered an underground command bunker. The humans had substantial guards and Yeur was curious as to the reasons for such heavy defense. Sydney was a relatively secure area of the planet. The Continent known as Africa had borne the brunt of the initial Covenant Assault.

The Golden Human eyed Yeur neutrally on the surface. No one save the Emperor and Yeur knew the complete truth. The human psykers had a vague, woefully inadequate, and potentially soul-crushing view of the psychic probe. Tzavaras, as the human referred to himself in Yeur's mind, was accessing the Collective Unconsciousness of the Sangheli people.

It should have been an impossibility.

"Have you learned what you needed?" Yeur asked through labored breaths.

"I have," the man said simply.

"You could have gained my knowledge at any time," Yeur said simply. "Why bring me here?"

Lord Hood crossed his arms. "The non-aggression agreement between your people and humanity is the only hope we all have of defeating the Prophets. We are not going to jeopardize that by torturing you."

Yeur cast a glance at a nearby screen. The reason was obvious now. "My brothers have arrived and you wish for conformation of their intent."

The assembled humans nodded. Yeur could not miss that several could barely contain their hatred of the Sangheli. The ancient Oracle Master was pleased by this observation. A species that was willing to forgive an enemy was a species that would have no future.

They would be prey for the strong and destroyed.

"This is Oracle Master Yeur to Sangheli ships. My mission from the College was a success. I say again, all objectives have been fulfilled."

The distinctive deep warble of an Elite filled the com. "I would have expected no less, Oracle Master."

"I would have fulfilled my mission, even in death. It is a shame I must fight my battles for the Sangheli with words instead of cleansing plasma and blade." Yeur pointedly ignored the tension and rage his reference to the Covenant's orbital superiority generated in the humans.

"Oracle Master, we have returned from one of the Sacred Rings. Theâ€|ceasefire with the humans holds. There are several on board our vessel." The unnamed shipmaster reported.

Lord Hood decided to join the conversation. "This is Admiral Hood. I demand to speak to my people."

"Admiral Hood, Commander Keyes reporting," Miranda said with evident relief.

"What is the status of your crew?" Terrence Hood

"Scattered, Admiral," Commander Keyes admitted. "Half of the Marine and Guard compliment is with me and the Elites. The rest of the Guardsmen and Marines are unaccounted forâ€|along with Captain Thomas and Librarian Casimiro and the other Space Marines."

"Damn, we will need every Space Marine and soldier if we are going to survive this," a UNSC officer cursed.

"The question remains," Lord Hood cut in. "Where exactly are we going to do with the Sangheli?"

Captain Angelos stepped forward. "If I may?"

Lord Hood, the God-Emperor, and the acting president of the United Earth Government all gave the Astartes permission to proceed. The civilian government's attempt at relevancy was completely ignored. Lord Terrence Hood received a nod of acknowledgement. Gabriel signed the Aquila and bowed deeply in reverence to the Emperor.

"The Blood Ravens have established a Castellum at Uluru. In addition to the might of the Third Company and elements of the Blood Ravens First, Seventh, and Tenth Companies; the Adeptus Mechanicus has an Ordinatus Platform in the area. The Xenos can repatriate our soldiers and disembark there."

"That is a wise course of action," Behar agreed.

"I will task a frigate flotilla to escort in the Supercarrier," Lord Hood added before tapping away at the terminal in front of him. "Contact Gregorian Squardon; I want those Firestorms on point."

Lord Admiral Hood had been granted overall command of the human naval forces as a sign of trust and respect. The Imperium knew well the value of the long road. Behar, however, knew the truth the Imperials could not accept.

There was no going back. There would be no Imperium of Man as it had been in the Forty-first Millenium. The coming battle would give birth to something new.

'_Perhaps my dream of an enlightened psychic humanity can be saved,'_ the Emperor thought.

Onyx

The ground wailed in torment as Te'oma, once known as Tom, vented his rage and hatred upon the world. Psychic fire ravaged everything in front of the sorcerer. He embraced and returned all the bitterness accumulated in his long years of reflection.

'_We may all be mere pieces on the board, but a skilled player does not waste valuable resources!_' Tom raged at the world. He knew it could not answer. Onyx possessed no signature in the Warp.

There was a very simple reason for the lack of signature. Onyx was not a natural planet.

It was a shell. The Forerunners had encircled a Slipspace structure with uncountable Sentinels. The Martyrs of the Mantle had designed Onyx as a Shield World; a place they could take refuge from the lighting of the Halo Array. However, the Forerunners had been unaware of an ancient wonder beyond even their advanced sciences.

The Black Library existed. Onyx was situated near an ancient spar of the Webway and the Onyx Dyson Sphere intersected perfectly with the Old One's transit system.

'_We must secure the Dyson Sphere. The ashes of the Forerunners and the Eldar cannot keep us from our destiny,'_ Tom declared.

'_Nothing can, my dear Tom,'_ Lucy assured her companion through their psychic bond. _'Not even Ambrose, the other blind fools of the UNSC or the slaves of the Corpse God. They may be destroying our pawns, but they are as ignorant as an infant in the womb.'_

Tom smiled as he watched his Rubric Marines continue their implacable advance. The automatons fired unnaturally accurate Inferno bolts into the Sentinels. Dozens of Sentinels fell from the sky even as their attacks failed to penetrate the Warp fields protecting the Chosen of Tzeentch.

The Chaos sorcerer reached his destination and smiled in grim satisfaction. Sentinels redoubled their efforts to repulse the Chaos Space Marines. They were doomed to fail. Tom and his Rubric Marines were close enough to their objective that the gaze of Tzeentch itself had fallen upon them. Reality itself wailed in pain as the unknowable Changer of Ways appraised the battle. Sorcerous flames erupted from screaming mouths that had appeared in the ground. Tom noticed the hesitation in the Sentinels as their programming struggled to comprehend the Warp. The Forerunners had programmed their most common guardians to understand the laws of physics.

Unfortunately, there was only one law in the blighted wastes: the Law and Will of Tzeentch.

The Flickering Fires of Tzeentch lashed out and consumed the Onyx Sentinels and Tom triumphantly approached his prize.

"I entreat thee, Changer of Ways! I call upon thine might, Architect of Fate!" Tom bellowed as he approached a seemingly inconsequential thermal exhaust port. Four of the Rubric Marines took their positions around the port as other Rubric Marines dragged five stasis pods into position. Witchfire poured from the optics of Tom's helmets as he circled the port. The Rubric Marines and Stasis pods matched with Tzeentch's sacred number of nine.

The former SPARTAN-III moved among his 'cousins' as he searched for the catalyst for his dark rite. Tom was not seeking the leader of Team Katana. Instead, he was searching for the most ambitious.

"Know that you are contributing to glory," Tom stated grandly as he paused in front of his chosen sacrifice. He reached deeply into the Warp and transferred a tendril of Tzeentchian flame into the Forerunner stasis pod. The Spartan died in silence and became the fuel for a Warp-Flame conflagration. Tom telekinetically lifted the pod and lowered it into the exhaust port.

In a moment of monstrous beauty, the energies of the Warp ravaged the Forerunner Information network. Lightning erupted from the ground and obliterated the active Sentinels and forced the inactive constructs to melt and fuse into a proper planet.

Tom allowed himself a moment of triumph as he screamed to the sky like a crazed Khornate Berserker. Even the sight of the Celestial Lion's drop pods entering the atmosphere could not steal this moment of utter glory.

"You are too late, slaves of the Anathema!"

Alpha Centauri

Commissar Madani was no hiver. He barely remembered his original homeworld before it was stolen by the foul green tide of WAAAGH! Meklug. The most vivid images, other than the rampaging terrors of the invasion, were of the red clay hills and the Kedar trees. These tunnels were claustrophobic and cold. He did not like this place. In a moment of selfishness, he wished he was with the Inquisitor de Loreant and Captain Spann on the orbital. The Commissar irrationally felt as if he was buried alive. Dabir resigned himself to performing his duty and found comfort and courage in his purpose. He moved through the fortified tunnels and saw to the needs of the troopers.

"Commissar?" A UNSC soldier asked as he approached. The soldier flashed a salute.

Dabir returned the salute sharply. "Is there an incident to report?"

"U-Urgent message from the Orbital, sir," the soldier reported quickly.

"Thank you," Commissar Madani responded equally as quickly and made his way to the nearest command center. Two Guardsmen of the 3rd Company of the Thariq 91st Regiment snapped to attention as the Commissar entered the command center. Dabir expertly hid his frown. The Thariq 91st had been devastated by the Tyranids of Hive Fleet Cerastes and had barely reorganized itself into six functioning companies on Kar Duniash when Lord Solar Nuliez had ordered them to take part in the Anomalus Crusade. It was a shame that High Command had declared that the Thariq 91st was to be deployed as individual companies to support other endeavors. Dabir shook off those thoughts as he completed the Rites of Encryption.

"This is Commissar Dabir Madani," he reported.

"Commissar, this is Captain Spann. Quixotic Wind just detected Slipspace Whispers at the edge of the system. The Covenant is coming. Prepare for war," the UNSC captain said solemnly.

"Captain, my earliest memory is war. I have been groomed and prepared for battle since my childhood. The Emperor protects."

The vox contact was broken and Commissar Dabir Madani unclasped the holster of his bolt pistol. He turned to the two guards and nodded once. The Commissar flipped a switch and tapped into the vox network. He spoke first to the Thariq 91st in their native dialect of Gothic. The words flowed like water. Madani spoke to their faith in the God-Emperor and their proximity to Holy Terra. He called upon the Guardsmen to defend the relics of their species.

Commissar Madani's voice reached a crescendo as he called upon the Guardsmen to stand beside their brothers in victory. He paused as he finished his speech. It was not planned, but based off the well-worn skeletons the Schola Progenia had drilled into his memory. With a deep breath, Commissar Madani began his speech to the UNSC marines.

"Soldiers of the UNSC, the Covenant is at our door!"

As the Commissar gave his speech, Captain Spann was waiting for the inevitable. The 'Dumb' AI Quixotic Wind was monitoring the Slipspace Whispers. The sheer scale of the whispers was unlike anything in the UNSC databanks.

"Not even the assault on Reach had Whispers like this," Spann breathed.

"The Orbital's Machine Spirit has calculated that most of the Covenant Fleet is moving on," Inquisitor de Loreant replied harshly. "They are going to strike Holy Terra."

"Attention, command staff," Quixotic Wind interrupted any response Spann could muster. "I have confirmed three Slipspace Exit Points at the edge of the system. Do you wish for active scans?"

"Negative, passive scans only," the Inquisitor ordered.

The minutes passed as if they were days. Finally, the AI spoke again, "Command staff, confirmed the Covenant force. The profiles match those of a Jackal Privateer and two smaller Slipspace-capable craft."

"Scavengers," Spann spat the word. "They are looking for easy targets for pillaging."

"They have found nothing of the sort," Jacques sneered. "They will die soon enough."

The AI's avatar flashed in alarm. "I have detected intrusion attempts!"

"Do not counter! We have to make them think this is an abandoned mining facility," de Loreant commanded.

The AI logged an ineffectual protest, but allowed the Kig-Yar to penetrate the only active storage medium on the orbital. "The Jackals have discovered the Reliquary! The privateer and its two escorts are accelerating."

"Martel, prepare to arm the melta torpedo," the Inquisitor ordered one of his acolytes. "Captain Spann, see to the platoons. When the enemy craft dock, I will psychically shield our presence. Use your best judgment as to whether you wish to board a Covenant vessel or retreat to the surface."

"Yes, sir," Spann responded before heading to see to his men. The Inquisitor took his position in an escape pod. After an intolerable amount of time, the Jackal ships docked with the station. The airlocks were blown away by plasma explosives and an agitated lance of Jackals cautiously made their way into the station. Spann and his marines watched from their concealed, psychically and physically, positions as four more lances boarded the Orbital. The Kig-Yar, lulled into a mirage of security by de Loreant's psychic gifts, began to ransack the human facility.

"Now!" Spann ordered through the heavily encrypted human network. Marines quickly boarded each of the smaller xenos craft. They weren't sure how many Jackals remained on board and did not want to risk a

prolonged engagement on an enemy controlled ship. Instead, they quickly located power junctions and placed a truly excessive amount of C-7 explosives.

Every team reported that their objectives were completed. Quixotic Wind, in its typical panicked voice, reported that the Kig-Yar had broken the limited encryption of the databank and had located the Reliquary location in the tunnels of the planet below. The privateer began moving towards the surface of the planet to plunder humanity's relics.

"Destroy your targets and retreat to the surface," de Loreant ordered.

The melta torpedo roared from its jury-rigged launcher towards the privateer. Its machine spirit performed basic evasion and dodged the few ill-aimed shots from the Kig-Yar ship. The capital-grade weapon struck the shields of the Covenant vessel and exploded in a violent conflagration. Inquisitor de Loreant, his retinue, and Spann's marines used the explosion as cover to retreat to the planet's surface and the safety of the subterranean tunnels. As the escape pods rained down, the C-7 explosives were detonated and successfully damaged the smaller craft. Quixotic Wind contributed to the assault as programmed. The AI vented the entire Orbital once all the humans had evacuated and the five Jackal lances were condemned to a horrible death in the cold vacuum of space.

Jacques smiled as the flare from the melta torpedo's detonation subsided. The Covenant's shields had been burned away by the explosion and huge gouts had been torn from the hull. The smaller vessels also had substantial hull breaches. The human soldiers were relieved that the simple autopilot programs of the escape pods managed to land them at their destination.

Commissar Madani silently pleaded with the machine spirit of the landing bay's doors to close. The massive doors eventually closed and the massive chamber's pressure equalized. Spann, the Inquisitor, and the other soldiers quickly got out of the cramped, outdated pods.

"Commissar, what is our status?" Inquisitor de Loreant demanded.

"Quixotic Wind reports that the xenos ship is heavily damaged. Unfortunately, the machine spirit has detected a few energy spikes that it hypothesizes are the result of the Jackals rerouting power to shields. I believe we have angered the xenos scum," the Commissar explained. He, like many Imperials, were uncomfortable with the concept of Artificial Intelligences because of the legends of the Iron Men Uprisings from the Dark Age of Technology.

"Good, it'll make killing them all the easier. Hopefully, the damage was severe enough that they can't just rain plasma down on our heads," Spann added.

Captain Najjar spoke in his rare dialect. The Commissar smiled as he translated. "Captain Najjar says that he is glad some of the xenos survived. He would have been disappointed if his men did not get a chance to kill any of them."

"We have dug a grave. Let us see who shall be buried here," de Loreant responded with a nearly feral snarl.

Onyx

Iago Martinez was afraid. He was more afraid now than he had been when Actium had been invaded and destroyed by the Covenant. The Covenant did not cause the sky to scream the names of the dead and bleed. This enemy was even more of a nightmare than the Elites and Jackals that Martinez swore to kill every night.

"Remember, hold the gun tight to your shoulder," an older SPARTAN-III trainee reminded the other children. "The M6I doesn't kick too bad. Aim for the center of the enemy."

Martinez gulped as another bestial creature rampaged out of the forest. One of the few older trainees gasped. "Is that one of the dogs?"

It had once been a dog imported to Onyx to provide companionship to the youngest trainees. Now, it was a hideous skinless abomination that possessed an extra set of legs and a bronze rune growing from its exposed skull.

"C-Controlled bursts," the trainee whimpered. The prospective SPARTANs fired a number of bursts at the corrupted creature. The shots were mostly wild, but several hit their target. Iago trembled as he silently prayed for someone to save him and his friends from the enemy. He needed to live so that he could fight the Covenant.

The sky began to scream, but in a new way. Unlike the earlier screams, there was no voice listing the names of all the SPARTANs who had fallen in battle against Chaos. This sound was almost familiar. Iago looked up and saw around a dozen balls of fire raining down from the skies.

"More of them! How can there be more of them?" Gregory, one of few older trainees at the bunker, screamed but in anger instead of fear. Three score of corrupted beasts massed at the tree line. There was nothing natural about these creatures. They were twisted, broken horrors. Iago looked to the heavens again and hoped one of the fireballs would save them.

The first group of Chaos beasts charged the position. Some howled almost naturally. Others cried out praises to the Dark Gods in nearly-human voices. The cry of the beasts was soon drowned out by the roar of atmosphere and metal. An enormous metal pod crashed in the very heart of the charging horde. Debris, offal, and flame were flung into the air as the ferrous comet made planetfall. The world seemingly fell silent as the blue and gold meteor cooled.

One of Iago's older friends, Miranda, peered out a window. "Is it moving?"

The meteor indeed moved. Iago realized the meteor had been slightly damaged somehow. He had heard on the radio something about 'flack batteries', but that didn't really mean anything to him. The hinges groaned and finally exploded outwards as a behemoth of metal emerged.

"**Fear not! We are the Celestial Lions and have descended to ensure the death of the rats that assail the Imperium!" **The behemoth roared.

Iago took in the behemoth. It was one of the largest things Iago had ever seen. The behemoth charged the surviving Chaos beasts and Iago was in awe. The enormous box with legs was moving faster than the child thought possible. Iago covered his ears as thunder erupted from the left arm of the metal savior. The young SPARTAN initiate was amazed at how the beasts exploded! Iago could tell that they had been hit by something, but he couldn't see what the gun had been. In a matter of seconds, the Chaos beasts had been eliminated.

Gregory headed for the door to try and talk with the behemoth. He barely opened the door before the Celestial Lion stopped in its tracks. It did not turn, but everyone knew that their rescuer was aware of Gregory.

"**Hold your position, aspirant. The alpha beast of this foul pack approaches. You will have many chances for glory, yet."** the mechanical warrior ordered. Gregory nodded once and went back inside. The authority in the voice was unmistakable. "**Come foul creature! I am Ancient Illiam of the Celestial Lions and I shall cleanse this world of your blasphemy!"**

A horror beyond even the corrupted canines emerged from the woods. The twisted creature was nearly as massive as Ancient Illiam. The Chaos Spawn moved like its smaller kin, but its front legs were terrible crab-like claws. The flesh was constantly bleeding a hideous mixture of pus, blood, and thick viscous oil. In the place of fur, tentacles that ended in snapping mouths grew from puckered lips on the things back.

The embodiment of madness roared the names of each of the Dread Gods of Chaos in turn before charging. Illiam stood firm and fired his melta at the Chaos Spawn. The wrathful beam tore a massive chunk out of the creature. The Dark Gods had granted the still favored spawn unnatural vitality. The beast roared in pain and rage and redoubled his efforts.

"**I am a Space Marine! And I know no fear!"** Illiam bellowed back and counter-charged. The ancient warrior smashed aside the spawn with his powerfist. The spawn skidded to a stop and struggled to regain its footing. Illiam strode purposefully over to the crippled abomination. The dreadnought's double-headed hammer of a right arm surged with energy as Illiam lifted it in the air. The SPARTAN aspirants felt the thunderous impact as much as they heard it.

Illiam laughed deep and dark at the bloody tally he had reaped. It had been decades since the Chapter had roused him to war. He was, and would always remain, a Space Marine. His destiny and calling was to scour the enemies of Mankind from the stars. The dreadnought reached out with his active sensors and confirmed another wave of traitors and heretics approaching his position. Illiam, once the Captain of the 5th Company, quickly appraised the situation. He had time to address the aspirants and neophytes.

"**Aspirants! We do not have much time,"** Illiam spoke through a

massive hidden vox speaker.

Gregory exited the bunker. "There are more enemies coming?"

"**You will come to learn that mankind will always be besieged. How many of you aspirants have begun your training?"**

"Ten of us had started actual training. We, well, we know how to use submachine guns," Gregory revealed.

"**A full squad as dictated by the Codex Astartes, good. There are thirty other humans with you. How have they been trained?"**Illiam enquired.

"Well, Miranda and I have been trying to show them how use the M6I." Gregory's mind raced at the sheer size of Illiam. The dreadnought's guns were larger than Gregory was!

"**I am unfamiliar with that weapon system,"** Illiam addressed the child.

"Oh, uh, it's a 13mm pistol with a stock," the boy explained quickly. "We only gave it to the older kids."

"**Do you have a vox?"**

"A what, sir?" Gregory gulped again. He somehow knew that Illiam wasn't a machine, not completely.

"**A communication device," **the Ancient clarified with surprising patience.

Gregory held his submachine gun tightly. "We have an encrypted radio. I-I can give you the frequency."

"**Do so. The enemy approaches." **Illiam turned and faced the surrounding treeline.

Gregory double-checked his gun's safety in a fit of nervousness. "Epsilon-41-2-Gamma."

"**Return to the bunker,"**Illiam ordered. Gregory practically ran to the door. Miranda was waiting and helped seal the bunker.

"That thing is so badass," Miranda breathed in awe.

Gregory took a deep breath. "I-I think that was a person once."

"**Children of Onyx, respond to this transmission," **Illiam's voice boomed in the radio.

"W-We're here, Illiam." Gregory exchanged a look with his best friend.

"**I will guide you in this coming storm. Oh, how I envy you! To feel the kick of your gun in your hands! To win the first of your many battle honors! To roar your defiance at the foe with your own voice!"**

"What do we need to do, sir?" Miranda asked.

"**Hold the line and see to your brothers and sisters,**" Illiam caught himself. "**I shall purge the the bulk of the foes that assail us. Your purpose is to smite any foe who evades my wrath. The next wave of heretics and monsters will arrive in a few minutes. Send a group of aspirants to find any heavy weapons.**"

"Yes sir," Gregory and Miranda said as one.

"**You two are now in command of your fellow aspirants. Rejoice in this opportunity to achieve glory so young! For the Emperor!**"

The two aspiring SPARTANs attempted a salute out of pure instinct and respect for Illiam's sheer command presence despite the fact that Illiam would not be able to see the salute. After a moment, Gregory walked up to Hugh, one of the older kids in the new group, and told him to look for heavy weapons.

"Miranda, I need you to get a group together and find out how much ammo we have," Gregory said quickly.

Miranda nodded. "I'll keep an eye out for other doors or damage while I'm looking."

"Good idea," Gregory agreed. "Something's bugging me, though."

Miranda looked up from where she was checking the magazine of her M7. "What's that?"

"Since when has there been an Emperor?"

Manas, Kyrgyzstan

Captain Senectus of the Iron Snakes Chapter had just completed the Rites of Maintenance on his Storm Shield when General Zahedi requested permission to enter the Iron Snakes' make-shift chapel.

"Enter, General," Senectus spoke with authority. The UNSC Army officer entered the enormous facility and approached the Astartes captain.

"Captain," Yahja began. He was slightly uneasy at treating someone with the rank of Captain as an equal. "My men and your Techmarine have patched your men into our communications network."

"You have my thanks," Senectus replied.

Yahja Zahedi inclined his head respectfully. "If I may Captain, I am curious about your deployment."

The Captain stood to his full height. Zahedi was in awe as the Astartes officer towered nearly three feet over him. "We are pledged to defend the refugees being sheltered in the mountains of the Indian Subcontinent. The Adeptus Astartes, save for a few specialist chapters like the Imperial Fists, are ill suited for static defenses and sieges. My Battle-brothers and I will strike where the enemy is weakest or where the hour is darkest. We shall strike with thunder

and fury to scour the traitors and xenos from the face of the galaxy!"

The UNSC general was taken slightly aback by the naked zealotry in the Space Marine's words. In a strange way, that zealotry was comforting in the face the horrors to come. Yahja opened his mouth to respond, but the universal human emergency siren interrupted any potential conversation.

An Astartes wearing bone-white armor with only the helmet and left knee sharing the same color scheme as the other Iron Snakes entered the room. The giant warrior inclined his head respectfully at the Captain. "Brother-Captain, the Navy reports a massive Slipspace Whisper and sentry-telepathy has confirmed the data. We are mere hours away from War."

Imperial Grand Cruiser _Palma_

Captain Paulos felt the sting of a new connection wire attaching to his artificial spine. The UNSC had opened their networks to the Imperial Navy and their Machine Spirits were proving adept at filtering the chaff data from the useful. Captain Paulos, like many in the Imperium's forces, pointedly, chose to refer to the UNSC AIs as Machine Spirits to avoid acknowledging that they were embracing one of the Imperium's oldest and most entrenched taboos. The ancient captain pushed his musings aside as he focused on the coming battle. The Covenant was nearly upon both Holy Terra and Sacred Mars. Paulos practically shook with rage. This was the second time the Covenant had attempted to despoil the Holy of Holies.

"My Lord Captain," Commander Kale said reverently.

"Yes, Commander?" Adiso asked as he interfaced with his vessel.

The Executive Officer stood straighter. "All is in readiness. The _Palma_ is eager for the chance to purge the Covenant."

"The _Palma_ herself is as eager as her crew," Paulo agreed. "The Admirals have provided our orders. We shall carry them out."

Kale nodded once and turned his attention to the giant viewports of the _Palma's_ bridge. "Do you know anything of this Fleet Admiral Harper?"

"He is suitably zealous. I respect his hatred of the xenos and all who threaten Mankind. The mere fact that he has survived for the entirety of the war speaks well to his skill." Paulos fixed his gaze on a _Lunar-class_ cruiser, the _Redoutable_ according to the Palma's sensors, and its trio of _Cobra-class_ escorts.

Tobias continued to observe the mighty war fleet. "You are correct, Captain. I am curious as to why he did not transfer his flag from the _And Furious Anger_. It is a mighty ship for the UNSC, but compared to the _Palma_ or even a _Lunar_ cruiserâ€¦"

"There is something you must learn, Tobias," Paulos said with the most human emotion his XO had ever heard. "Even though Admiral Harper is not interred upon a Command Throne, his ship is as much a part of his soul as the _Palma_ is of mine."

The Imperial Fist's Castellum, Kenya

Veteran Sergeant Andreas approached his Captain reverently. "Brother-Captain, I am glad to see you well. It would have been a tragedy for you to leave no relics for the Chapter."

Captain Thomas bowed his head slightly. "My service to the Chapter will end when the Emperor wills it."

"And now, we serve the Embodied Emperor. The Blood of Dorn in the Chapter's vein recognized the truth of the Emperor instantly." Andreas reported to his commander.

Warin contemplated the fact that the Imperial Fists were performing their most solemn duty: the Defense of Terra. It was a role the inheritors of Dorn's legacy had performed several times. The first, greatest, and most terrible defense of Terra was during the Horus Heresy. Dorn and Sigismund had held the Imperial Palace against the tide of Traitor Legionnaires and Daemons. Horus's Siege was simultaneously one of the Imperial Fists' greatest victories and tragedies. The second defense of Terra was another defense against betrayal. The dark days known as The Beheading saw the Grandmaster of Assassins Vangorich slaughter the High Lords of Terra. It took the Imperial Fists, the first Sable Swords, and the Halo Brethren to bring the full weight of Imperial Justice to the Assassins. Vindicare and Evesor Assassins reaped a bloody tally of the Astartes task force. The original Sable Swords had been wiped out through a combination of the losses from The Beheading and the rampages of the Ork Warlord known as the Beast. It was a single point of pride in the whole dark undertaking that it had been an Imperial Fists who had put the fatal bolt through Vangorich's skull.

As Warin passed a large battlement manned by Techpriest Donnel and his Thunderfire cannon, the Captain's Genetic Memories of the Wars of Apostasy surfaced of their own accord. The insane High Lord Goge Vandire nearly tore down the Great Work of the Emperor. It had taken the combined efforts of the Imperial Fists, Black Templars, Soul Drinkers, the Fire Hawks, Adeptus Mechanicus and others to help bring down Vandire.

"The Company received a great honor," Captain Warin Thomas agreed with utmost sincerity and awe.

Andreas nodded. "Aye, Brother-Captain."

Andreas bowed to his captain as Chaplain Roh emerged from the shadows. "Captain." The Chaplain did not move a single muscle as he greeted the Fourth Company's Commander. Chaplain Roh was a harsh and exacting Chaplain.

"Chaplain Roh," Thomas returned the greeting.

"We had feared you lost," the chaplain said without hesitation. "Your armor is suitably bloodied with Tyranid ichor and the viscera of other xenos."

"I may have been separated from the Chapter, but I was and will never be lost. I will always have the heritage of Dorn and the Imperial Fists to guide me."

The skull-helmeted chaplain grunted. "It gladdens me that you have taken your indoctrination to heart. The truths of the Emperor and Dorn and the wisdom of the Book of Five Rings and the Codex Astartes have become as much a part of you as your arm and Black Carapace."

Captain Warin only nodded a single time in agreement. Roh continued. "Sergeant Andreas established our fortifications quickly. They appear to be based off your own fortifications from our action on Daelus VI."

"They are nearly identical, save for differences in terrain and concessions to gravity," The Fourth Company Captain revealed. "I have already made adjustments and altered the Company's contingency plans. We have never delivered Imperial Justice to the Covenant. On Daelus VI, we battled Tau. The Covenant has many doctrinal differences, especially in light of their recent schism."

"Your mind remains as sharp the blade of the _Edge of Inwit_," the Chaplain stated approvingly.

"The company recovered it?"

"Yes, but it never should have been separated from you in the first place. Though you were battling the Great Enemy and defending mortal civilians with a tenacity that brought honor to Dorn Himself, you must remain cognizant of all details," Roh slightly admonished the captain. Chaplain Roh had been a resolute figure in Captain Thomas' life since his elevation from the 10th Company to the 4th centuries ago. Captain Thomas was well aware of Roh's tendency to launch into speeches. It was rumored Roh would even make such impromptu addresses to Chapter Master Pugh himself. Though, those speeches were believed to be very rare and often broached with far more care and far less flair for the dramatic.

The two entered a small chapel built into the defensive network. Roh stood to the side and allowed the Captain to reclaim and appease the spirit of _Edge of Inwit_. After a moment of prayer, Warin hefted the ancient ax. The familiar weight of the iconic relic of the Chapter was a welcomed sensation.

"Brother-Captain, Chaplain Roh," the newly-promoted Sergeant Azarius voxed.

"Report, Sergeant," Captain Thomas took complete charge. Chaplain Roh instinctively knew Azarius brought tidings of war. Roh's place in the Company was one of spiritual guidance and discipline. The ancient Chaplain knew the arts of war as well as any Astartes, but his purpose was unmistakable. His role was not to lead his brothers in battle, unless the Captain willed it.

"The Navy reports the Covenant will be upon us in a few short hours." The Captain could easily picture Azarius' face taking on a grim countenance that would be at odds with his eagerness to destroy the Emperor's foes.

"They come to die. Humanity will never surrender Terra to any force," Captain Thomas declared. "Primarch-Progenitor! To your glory and the glory of Him on Earth!"

Cairo Station

Lord Hood stared at the tactical displays. The Techpriests had somehow managed to install the lance battery from a crippled Firestorm Escort, void shields, and a powerful generator to power all the Imperial upgrades. Admiral Hood had no idea how the patchwork upgrades were interfacing so successfully, but he was thankful for them. Hood had seen the cadre of Enginseers Magos Micel and Arc-Magos Gho had assigned to Cairo Station performing arcane rituals that had somehow boosted the efficiency of the entire station. Trafalgar Memory, the new Smart AI assigned to Lord Hood after Cortana's semi-unauthorized deployment to the front, had reported communicating with the lance battery on a few occasions. It boggled Lord Hood's mind, but supposedly the weapons system was furious and practically rabid because of the damage it had sustained in the Fall of Medusa V. Trafalgar Memory also claimed to have convinced the Machine Spirit that it would have plenty of opportunities for revenge.

The revelation that the Cairo was now hosting a bloodthirsty and enraged mechanical spirit was unnerving. Lord Hood only took a small comfort from the Machine Spirit's professed loyalty to mankind.

Lord Hood's meditation on one facet of his new and terrifying reality was cut short by the squawking of his communication equipment. He glanced at the Contact ID and hit the icon on the screen. It was probably the last time he would be able to use the touchscreen for the foreseeable future. "Go ahead Io."

"Sir, we've confirmed fifteen Slipspace Exit Points," Io reported. There were no concerns about the Covenant intercepting the communications. Io had been equipped with one of the few and jealously guarded Quantum Entanglement devices in the UNSC.

"The scouts have arrived. You have permission to act with your own initiative," the Admiral surmised.

"Aye, aye sir," the leader of the small outpost responded nervously. "I wish I had a NOVA bomb, sir."

"The anti-matter mines will do what we need them to," Hood countered. "Report when the main body of the Covenant Fleet arrives."

"Aye, aye sir." The connection was quickly cut and Lord Hood focused on ordering all the orbital stations and fleets to Combat Alert Alpha. He continued to focus on his duties as a counter to the fear eating away at the corners of his mind. Lord Hood did not want think about how he was a few short minutes from being a participant in the apocalypse.

Time's advance had become less of a flow and more of a trickle. The tension that hung in the air was as oppressive as anything anyone onboard the Cairo had felt since the attack by one of Khorne's abominations.

"Fleet Admiral Hood, this is Io Station," the commander of the skeleton crew of volunteers manning Io station reported.

"Go ahead Io," the Admiral ordered. The weight of the coming report was tangible.

"Sir, the Covenant RPV destroyers were the recon element. We have confirmed seventy-nine additional Slipspace Exit Points. Multiple Covenant ships were using single SEPs," the anonymous officer continued to appraise his commander. Lord Hood looked at the data his own sensors were providing. The information matched what the Io sentries were reporting.

Lord Hood was about to request additional information, but the sentry shouted in panic. "We've been discovered! Confirmed Covenant Sensor Ping! Yeltsin, send the detonation codes! Lord Hood, we're falling back to the shelters! Will attempt to reestablish connection from secondary position!"

"Confirmed Io! Godspeed and good luck!" Lord Hood acknowledged.

Over six hundred thousand kilometers away from Earth, a number of antimatter mines exploded in the heart of the Covenant formation. These devices were prototypes and not all detonated successfully. The few that detonated with the full fury of their design crippled several Covenant destroyers and Kig-Yar raiders. It was a paltry butcher's tally, but the true effect of the mines was far more important. They secured extra time for Earth and Mars. Time has always been humanity's most sought after resource. The mines slowed the Covenant's advance slightly and thus increased the time for more civilians to be evacuated. The mines had bought an additional three hours of preparation. In the future, mankind would celebrate those three hours with fervor and elation.

"Contact!" One of the junior officers manning the various stations shouted. "The Mars defensive fleet reports they will be in weapons range in three minutes!"

"Behar, I hope you saved a few miracles for today," Admiral Hood whispered. He looked up with fiery determination. "Patch me through to Admiral Kaal."

The Imperial _Oberon-class_ battleship _Ut Praemium Hostilis_

"Xenos vessels entering weapons range. Commencing Targeting Rites," a servitor droned behind Admiral Kaal's Command Throne.

"Prepare to launch all attack craft and bombers," Kaal ordered. The crew responded with efficiency. One of the officers turned to face his Admiral.

"My Lord, a communicuÃ© from Lord Admiral Hood," the officer reported.

Obvi Kaal inclined his head in acknowledgement. He interfaced directly with the _Ut Praemium Hostilis_ and pulled up Lord Hood's channel.

"Lord Admiral Hood," Obvi greeted formally.

"Admiral Kaal, this is it. Give the Covenant hell and good hunting," Lord Hood said resolutely.

Kaal took a deep breath. "Our fleets shall slaughter these xenos for their affront to human honor! Every death they have inflicted upon

our people shall be returned one-hundred-fold!"

"Targeting Rites complete," the servitor reported.

"Fire," Obvi Kaal ordered in a voice filled with rage, defiance against fate, and determination.

The space around Mars erupted as hundreds of vessels, both human and Covenant, opened fire. It was November 10, 2552. It was the End of Days.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Yes, I know it has been far too long. No excuses. If you want to thank people for helping get my muse in gear, thank WhackbarWop and Battle Bruva Volk.<p>

And now for a bit of personal nostalgia. This chapter signifies the start of Part II. I am (on my phone which explains any odd errors in this note) sitting on the same couch in the same beach house, leeching the same dude's unencrypted Internet where I actually began planning and writing Chains of the Kindred. How's that for coming full circle?

22. Chapter 22

Sol System

Reality screamed as the titanic energies of the Covenant and Human fleets tore into each other. An Imperial Lunar-class cruiser, the Silver Edge of Faith, decelerated to broadside velocity as it forced a wedge in the Brute lines. The Imperial cruiser's laser and solid slug batteries erupted in pure rage at the two Covenant CCS-Battlecruisers. Shields, both Void and Energy, flared as the fire was exchanged.

"Void Shields failing!" One of the bridge officers of the Silver Edge of Faith shouted over the din of the ship's hull protesting the shockwaves of weapon impacts and the constant firing of the ship's own weapons.

Captain Reah growled from his Command Throne. "Where is Escort Squadron Aelap?"

"Silver Edge of Faith, this is Captain Johnson. The Say My Name and six destroyers are on our way! MAC cannons fire!"

Hundreds of kilometers away, truthfully grapple range rather than knife-fight range; the UNSC ships unleashed their hate at the closest Covenant vessel. The Brute Shipmaster was focused on the Silver Edge of Faith and could not refocus on the cannonade of MACs. The shots from the Say My Name's MAC cannon obliterated the shields of the battlecruiser. The Archer missiles that followed tore the Brute vessel apart. Explosions rippled across the sleek hull like bubbles in boiling water.

The UNSC ships raced by the massive human behemoth and engaged the second Covenant Battlecruiser. Escort Squadron Aelap was three thousand kilometers away. The four Sword Escorts were circling and

tearing into a crippled Assault Carrier as befitting their wolf-pack namesake.

Humanity was fighting with a ferociousness the UNSC had believed their species had sought to suppress. Now, that savagery was being embraced. The Covenant was taken aback by the savageness of the humans. The Brutes relished the visceral combat, but they were unprepared for the onslaught. Jiralhanae Chieftains had learned well of the humans furious determination. Now, the pagan humans were fighting with sheer hate and the most primal of all drives.

The desire to simply survive.

In spite of, and to spite, the human resistance, the Covenant drove their Assault Carriers through the gauntlet. It was true that the Moot of Chieftains had lost six Assault Carriers, but they had successfully penetrated the atmosphere of Mars with nearly a dozen more.

The Covenant War had reached the surface of Mars.

Alpha Centauri

The Jackals finally penetrated the great doors of the mining complex. They received no immediate response. None among the Kig-Yar expected such an easy entrance. Their overconfidence convinced them to abandon their carefully planned phalanx. Shipmaster Razak unleashed his few remaining Skirmisher kin. Skirmishers had always been mistrusted by the Covenant. They were always bloodthirsty and secretive. The Sangheli, already disdainful of the Kig-Yar, particularly loathed the Skirmishers. Sangheli Ascetics looked for every opportunity to prove their suspicions of Heresy. They never found any concrete evidence and that only deepened the Elite's hatred.

The Sangheli had taken advantage of the free hand the Prophets had granted their Fleet and Field Masters during the assault on Reach. They had thrown Skirmishers into the most vicious and hopeless of battles. Human artillery and strongpoints had reaped a bloody tally on the Skirmishers. However, the Skirmishers had reveled in the bloodshed.

Razak felt there was something fundamentally wrong with his genetic cousins.

"Ryrr zra Vorn! Ryrr zra Vorn!" The Skirmishers chanted. Each Skirmisher had abandoned the traditional Needler or Carbine of their species. Instead, they all carried energy cutlasses or the Brute Spiker. Razak focused on of the cameras on his shock troopers and realized the prideful Sangheli had been right.

The Skirmishers were heretics! They had carved a hideous rune over the symbols of the Covenant and were chanting something about 'Seat of Vorn'.

"Tra," Razak whispered into his communicator.

"What, Shipmaster?" Tra, the ship's second in command, responded quickly.

"Don't support the Skirmishers during their assaults. If any survive

after we plunder this place, have our sharpshooters kill them all."

"That's an order I can get behind. It'll be a larger share for us and I don't trust those maniacs," Tra agreed.

"Let them attack," the Shipmaster ordered.

The Skirmishers eagerly complied with the order. The creatures rushed forward and used their enhanced senses to track the humans. Tra and the other Kig-Yar were glad to be rid of their 'cousins' and listened hopefully for the shooting to start.

As the Skirmishers advanced, Quixotic Wind was observing the aliens. The AI mechanically filed reports with the soldiers.

"Kig-Yar Skirmishers approaching Defense Position One," the AI transmitted to the soldiers and Inquisitor.

"First Platoon," Captain Spann spoke calmly. "Kill every one of those animals."

Spann heard Captain Najjar given an order. The tone was similar enough that Spann could understand the message even in the face of the language barriers.

"Contact," Lieutenant Qi reported. Spann heard the Thariqi Guardsmen erupt in a fury and open fire.

"Commissar! I need a translation!" Spann rumbled into the radio. He quickly knew something was happening; something he could not control.

Madani's voice had a cold edge in his voice. "Lieutenant Azan has seen the mark of Chaos branded in the flesh of the xenos. We will need a place to establish a cleansing pyre. Their filth cannot be allowed to fester near the Relics of Mankind."

"Chaos? Our enemies are working together?" Spann asked in naked disbelief.

"I will discover the truth of it," Madani hissed and cut the line.

Spann hastily switched channels. "Chaa•, talk to me! What's going on?"

Chaa• ducked behind an outcropping of rock. "The Imperials just went nuts! They saw this tattoo all the Skirmishers had and started chanting something that sounds really pissed off. The Skirmishers are equipped weird, lots of Brute weapons and swords."

Spann's response was lost in the symphony of weapons fire and explosion. The Skirmishers somehow managed to slip a few of their number through the withering fire and closed.

One of the Thariqi Guardsmen stabbed at a charging Skirmisher with his bayonet. The avian xenos roared something the translation software couldn't understand. The Skirmisher brought down his strange cutlass and the blade cut deep into the Guardsman's flesh. The

tainted xenos was quickly shredded by a fusillade of vengeful lasgun fire.

ChaÅ• had never been caught up in a melee like this before. It was vicious and mindless. The Skirmishers seemed to be killing for the sake of killing. ChaÅ• fired a few shots from his Battle Rifle into a charging Skirmisher. It dropped, but not from his shots. Instead, the tell-tale pink shards of a Needler impact fell to the ground.

'_The hell?_' ChaÅ• thought in utter shock.

It didn't take long for the universe to answer the question. The other Jackals were rounding the corner and firing blindly into the swirling melee. ChaÅ•'s eyes went wide in realization.

The Jackals wanted to kill everything else in the facility.

"Sir! The Jackals just turned on the Skirmishers!" ChaÅ• shouted into his radio.

"The hell?" Spann asked.

"That was my first thought, too," ChaÅ• answered.

"Hell is what is about to hit your position. The Jackals appear to have deployed every alien who can hold a gun," The Captain reported.

ChaÅ• gruned. "Fantastic. We can't get the Tharqi to fall back. They are in some kind of religious rage."

"As they should be," Commissar Madani hissed as he entered the battlefield. The Commissar's bolt pistol barked and struck a Skirmisher in the chest. The alien exploded from the impact and the nature of the bolt rounds.

"Sir, the Jackals are about to hit this position with everything they have," ChaÅ• reported.

"I know," the Commisar said through gritted teeth. He shouted an order in the Tharqi dialect. "Lieutenant, I need your platoon to lay down suppressive fire. I will lead my fellow guardsmen to their fallback positions. This area is too favorable to the xenos."

"Sir," ChaÅ• quickly agreed. _'I just hope that AI can slow the Jackals down somehow.'_

Onyx

The forests of Onyx were ablaze. Explosions, lasfire, bolters, and arcane Warp magic ravaged the Forerunner shield world. As the forces of Chaos threw themselves at the freshly arrived Imperial and UNSC armies, Tom and Lucy were advancing to their fell objective. The two Chaos sorcerers were facing laughable resistance from the few Sentinels that had somehow resisted the touch of Chaos.

"My Lord, Te'oma," a braying sycophant contacted Tom. "The Imperium has arrived! We are holding the line, but the Celestial Lions and 9th Andraste Templars are making planetfall."

"The arrival of the Imperium was not unexpected. Take heart," Tom said with forced ease. "The Chaos Gods have foreseen this. It will be impossible for the slaves to the Corpse God and the fascist incompetents of the UNSC to deny the will of the Dark Gods."

"Of course. The Dark Gods cannot be denied, but what of your loyal followers?" The cultist asked.

"You have been given a great opportunity to slay the slaves of the Anathema. You exalt Chaos with your every action. What could be a higher purpose than that?"

The vox channel was silent for a moment. "There is no higher purpose. Glory to the Dark Gods."

"They have accepted their role in Tzeentch's plans," Lucy smirked. "More importantly, they will delay our enemies."

The Chaos Sorcerer nodded. "Ambrose and the other deluded heathens will be suitably stalled. They cannot deny the Will of Tzeentch."

Several dozen miles away, Lieutenant Commander Ambrose was relieved to have orbital communications restored. The Imperial and UNSC navies had arrived with a small taskforce and had driven the Chaos flotilla into the system's asteroid belt and Oort Cloud.

"Sir, what do you think Tom and Lucy are after?" Mendez asked over the noise from the Elephant's engine and the roar of Imperial Thunderbolt fighters.

"They are heading for some of the Forerunner structures near the poles," Ambrose said distractedly.

"Is there something on your mind, Kurt?" Dr. Halsey asked.

"Just what turned Tom and Lucy to this," Kurt motioned to the burning world.

"The UNSC was likely," Halsey's retort was cut off when the Elephant came under fire from dozens of high powered rounds, plasma fire, missiles and assorted ordinance.

"Everyone out!" Mendez barked as the giant transport's structure began to fail. The SPARTANS laid down heavy covering fire, but their targets were nigh-impervious to their weapons.

Standard infantry weapons were useless against Forgefiends and Chaos Space Marines.

The only solid hits any of the SPARTANS were scoring were from Linda's sniper rifle or the SPANKr a SPARTAN-III had managed to secure before abandoning the now crippled Elephant.

"We're surrounded!" Another SPARTAN-III shouted as she fired to suppress a pair of advancing Chaos Space Marines. The gesture was futile and the tainted Astartes laughed at the SPARTAN's futility. The young SPARTAN and a fellow III was quickly shredded by the twin Hades Autocannons of one the two Forgefiends.

Dr. Halsey looked up at the terrors emerging from the fire and smoke that were coming to claim her Spartans, her legacy. 'The Spartans deserve so much more than to die here at the hands of madmen.'

As soon as her thoughts concluded, there was a flash of light and a deafening artificial thunderclap. Catherine was quickly overwhelmed by the smell of ozone. Eleven figures emerged from the pillars of light. Instantly, four rockets had been fired from massive launchers on the shoulders of two of the armored behemoths.

"**For the Imperium of Man!" **The central figure bellowed. Halsey noticed that the leader of the new arrivals was un-helmeted. The giant moved faster than the scientist thought possible in such a massive suit of armor. She watched in morbid fascination as the golden-suited warriors engaged the Chaos Space Marines in melee combat. The impact of the hammers three of the warriors was so loud it drowned out the staccato crack of bolters and assault rifles.

The leader's glowing claws tore massive gouts in every enemy that he fought. Halsey lost count of the number of Chaos Marines that had died after the seventh enemy that fell to the man with the wild beard and claws. After a few moments, the only sounds were the intermittent pops from the burning Elephant and the footfalls of the SPARTANs' saviors.

"Lieutenant Commander Ambrose," the leader bellowed.

Ambrose chambered a fresh round into his MA5K. "Thanks for the assist. You wouldn't happen to be Chapter Master Khaba?"

"I am," Khaba said impassively. "The Celestial Lions have deployed, completely in our sacred Tactical Dreadnought Armor, to drive Chaos from this world."

"It is an honor to meet you. Did the UNSC send any support in addition to your Chapter and the 'Imperium of Man'?" Kurt asked.

Khaba nodded his massive head. "The UNSC has deployed Battlegroup Stalingrad. Admiral Patterson has begun deploying the marines under his command alongside the

9th Andraste Templars. This world will be cleansed very soon."

"I just want as many of my SPARTANS to survive as possible," Ambrose declared.

"They are the future and we must secure them. An eternity of war awaits mankind and we will need every soldier, SPARTAN, and Astartes to ensure the survival of our species," Khaba replied to Kurt's declaration with one of his own.

Dr. Halsey watched the exchange between the two supersoldiers with a mix of fear, anger, and desperation. The scientist had come to Onyx to save the SPARTANs from a hopeless future of war and death. Her plans were coming dangerously close to being derailed by this mysterious and warmongering 'Imperium of Man'.

"If we can't stop Tom and Lucy, there won't be a future for the

SPARTANs. Those two are planning _something_, but we have almost no intelligence. Whatever it is, we must stop it," Kurt spoke with urgency.

"I will contact my Techmarines. I have a feeling we will need Master of the Forge Harak. He will bring his brother Techmarines and Razorbacks for your SPARTANs," Khaba explained.

Dr. Halsey took a deep breath and centered her thoughts again. "Why are we not using aircraft? It appears as if we have gained air superiority over the forces of Chaos."

Khaba appraised the scientist and nodded. "The two _traitors_ are heading towards a Forerunner facility in Zone 67. The Imperial Navy had slowed their advance with Thunderbolt fighters, but a Sorcerous Ritual summoned strange storms and Helldrakes."

"Helldrakes?" Kurt asked as he caught sight of several gigantic aircraft approaching their position.

Khaba nodded. "Flying Daemon Engines. They are a foul fusion of Chaos and Technology."

The massive craft landed and several tanks were deposited. Three were very large Armored Fighting Vehicles with obscenely large turrets on top. One clearly had an assortment of energy weapons. Halsey recognized two of the weapons as plasma-based. The crackling arcs of electricity reminded her of the heavy Covenant weapons she had seen in her years of war. The second weapon on the AFV was a long-barreled cannon. Halsey did not doubt the weapon's power.

The other two AFVs had two large rotary cannons on their turrets. Truly, the vehicles were impressive war machines.

They were utterly dwarfed by the monolithic engines of destruction that stood sentinel behind them.

Halsey had come to despise war as the hopelessness of the Covenant's onslaught sank into the core of her soul. Even then, these monuments to Humanity's destructive nature awed her.

"W-What are those?" A SPARTAN-III, Travon-G291 gasped.

A Celestial Lion wearing armor that had two large mechanical 'arms' emerging from back of the armor and a gigantic cannon mounted over the right shoulder strode forward. The SPARTANs noted that the majority of his armor was painted a rust-like Red color and only his right pauldron bore the heraldry of the Celestial Lions. "These are the Honored Land Raiders _Sekhmet_ and _Maahes_."

Sekhmet and _Maahes_ were enormous tanks and rivaled Covenant 'Spirit' Dropships in size. _Maahes_ proudly bore the heraldry of the Celestial Lions chapter and was heavily armed. The first weapon was the same twin-rotary cannon turret found on the smaller Razorback transports, but the turret appeared properly proportioned on the enormous war machine. The other weapons were two banks of anti-personnel weapons and a strange pintle-mounted canon.

The _Sekhmet_ was equally as massive, but lacked the forward facing turret. A sensor array replaced the turret and the anti-personnel

weapons were replaced by twin-linked laser weapons. However, the most striking feature was the enormous missile battery mounted near the rear of the tank.

"Impressive," Kurt-051 stated with undeniable understatement dancing on every syllable.

"The Land Raider is one of Mankind's greatest weapons. Truly, they are our species' unconquerable spirit made manifest; protected by thrice-blessed ceramite and metal while armed with sanctified weapons to give voice to our rage," Master of the Forge Harak explained with naked religious fervor coloring his oddly mechanical voice.

Catherine stared at the assembled warriors and nearly despaired. She had to rescue her SPARTANs, not only from the Covenant, but from the Astartes as well. They deserved so much more than to be martyred statistics.

'I cannot fail and you will not stop me, Khaba,' Dr. Catherine Halsey silently declared not only to the Chapter Master of the Celestial Lions, but to herself and the universe.

Mars

The Red Planet was burning.

Sergeant G  rard Nablus of the Knight Brothers of Kadesh watched as a Covenant Phantom Dropship slid gracefully into position. The xenos were dropping off waves and waves of their Uggnoy cannon fodder to soften the human positions. G  rard laughed at the foolishness. The Knight Brothers of Kadesh were rarely using their bolters to push back the tide of Grunts. Instead, they coordinated with the entrenched Imperial Guard and UNSC Army positions to rain artillery and mortar fire on the advancing aliens. The few survivors of the bombardment were scoured from the defensive line with combat knives and G  rard's Powerfist.

"Sergeant Nablus, this is Arc-Magos Yesl Gho. The Machine God has provided a great opportunity to the Defenders of Mars," the Arc-Magos's voice rang in G  rard's helmet vox.

The Astartes Sergeant did not vocally respond, but simply clicked his transmitter to acknowledge the point. G  rard was far more focused on the incoming Guard artillery fire. Explosions blossomed along the Covenant lines and thousands of xenos died in fire. Sergeant Nablus noted with grim satisfaction that the Phantom took a direct hit and was obliterated.

"The xenos Covenant will be launching a new attack shortly. Our superior mastery of the Omniassiah's mysteries has allowed us to gain valuable intelligence. A Xenos Corvette will be advancing to land and support the next Covenant Offensive. ODSI Captain Barkley and his company are delivering several of the UNSC Semi-sentient Machine Spirits to assist you."

"Confirmed, Arc-Magos. Tactical Squad Bodrum will deliver the Emperor's Justice to the Covenant," G  rard said as the smoke cleared. There were still hundreds of Grunts and Brutes advancing on the Knight Brothers' position.

Sergeant Nablus noted with satisfaction that they were using mounds of their dead allies as cover. "Brothers! Cleanse the surface of Mars of this filth!"

Miles away, a much larger battle was being waged. Three Imperial Guard Regiments, dozens of UNSC companies, and twice as many UNSC Army companies were engaged in the largest tank battle since the Battle of Actium in 2545. The Covenant had deployed thousands of Wraiths, Locusts, Prowlers, and even Scarabs.

Private Solomon De'Orlan fought the urge to cover his ears over the roar of tank engines, shells, and plasma discharges. The Battle of Mars was his first engagement after his conscription.

"Deo! Xenos light vehicle approaching from 45!" Sergeant Bellows shouted.

Solomon saw the xenos vehicle known as the Brute Prowler racing towards the Leman Russ Battle Tank. The seventeen-year-old conscript aimed the sponson multimelta at the Brute vehicle. There was a single flash of light and the Prowler was cut in half. De'Orlan smiled broadly with pride at his first kill. There was no remorse or angst about his actions. He had not taken a human life. Brutes were hostile xenos and the Ecclesiarchy taught that they were less than animals.

"Good shot, Deo. I think you'll fit right in," Bellows boasted over the clamor of war.

Solomon was about to thank his commander when his world ended. A beam of coherent plasma tore through the Leman Russ. The Locust stalked the battlefield as shells and plasma exploded around it. Debris and corpses littered the sands of Mars. In a moment, the entire world seemed to erupt in fire. A second full company of UNSC Army Scorpions had arrived. Dozens of human tanks tore into the flanks of the Covenant formation. The Locust that had killed Private De'Orlan died from seven direct hits from 90mm shells.

"This is Captain Lutrell," the commander of the UNSC armored company announced. "Additional reinforcements are en route."

The Scorpions immediately began hunting the ponderous Locust Walkers. The heavier Leman Russ Tanks were needed to eliminate the Scarabs and Wraiths. The Locust Walkers were easily the largest threats and had difficulty targeting the swarms of maneuverable UNSC Scorpions and Imperial Guard Devil Dogs. The Melta Cannons on the Devil Dogs were reaping a fearsome tally, but they were beset by swarms of Brute Choppers.

"Captain Lutrell, this is Colonel Nantakarn. The Navy is losing orbital superiority. Covenant numbers are beginning to press their advantage."

Captain Lutrell had a flash of confusion. "Sir, then why are we not drowning in Banshees and Phantoms?"

"You can thank Colonel Ty'kan Molari of the 42nd Gre'er Air Defense Regiment. His Hydra batteries are a god-send. If it wasn't for the 42nd Gre'er, we would have been pulling you out," the colonel

explained.

Before Lutrell could respond, a second voice boomed over the radio. "Confirmed! Covenant Scarabs inbound. The Imperium is relocating a strategic weapon to counter the advance. SPARTAN Team Jaeger is providing targeting data."

"Colonel!" Lutrell shouted in alarm to Colonel Nantakarn. "What type of strategic weapon are we talking about?"

Colonel Nantakarn's reply was cut out by the shocked wailing of Lutrell's Motion Detector. The system had in-built alarms for when a contact of a certain size appeared. Generally, this meant Covenant Warships or Scarabs.

There was nothing 'general' about the Battle of Mars.

A self-propelled city-block rumbled through a dust cloud. The massive mobile strongpoint came to a halt a few hundred meters away from Lutrell's position.

"This is Captain Alessia Pelinal of the Cadian 903rd Heavy Armor Regiment, commander of the _Phylarches_. We require close-in support until the capacitors finish charging."

Lutrell blinked inside his helmet and quickly redoubled his efforts to destroy the Covenant. "You heard the lady! Keep those Prowlers off the _Phylarches!_"

"This is SPARTAN-278 of Jaeger Team. We have painted Scarab Three. Confirmed Brute High Commander present," Master Chief Castiel-278 reported.

"Capacitors charged!" Captain Pelinal shouted after several tense minutes of unyielding combat. "Logic Engines confirm targeting solution! Fire!"

The order from the Cadian officer was drowned out by the shriek of rage from the massive cannon of the _Phylarches_. The Volcano Cannon belched forth a beam of coherent rage. In a heartbeat, the massive energy wave struck its target. Metal, composites, and the millions of Lekgolo worms that formed the Scarab were atomized. The Brute Chieftain, Jortarus the Line Breaker, was obliterated before he even had time to pray for absolution for his failure.

"Engineâ€¦kill!" Alessia announced between barks of triumphant laughter.

Onyx

The ground was slick with a hideous mixture of blood, oil, rain, and other fluids. As the world of Onyx was engulfed in the shadows of Chaos, Ancient Illiam of the Celestial Lions stood as a bulwark against the encroaching darkness.

"**Come, heretics! Bear witness to the power you have chosen to deny!" **Illiam roared as his footfalls echoed through the forests. After the attack by the Chaos-tainted dogs and their Chaos Spawn Alpha, the heretics had discovered his position. They had sent a platoon-sized horde of cultists against the Ironclad Dreadnought.

Illiam had purged them with flame, melta blasts, and his seismic hammer. The ancient Astartes was pleased that the SPARTAN Aspirants had provided supporting fire and even eliminated a few of the cultists.

The next wave of heretics was roughly two platoons of light infantry with several heavy weapons. However, the true threat was a defiled Chimera equipped with an autocannon turret. Illiam needed to press the attack. He could not afford to get bogged down by the light infantry and become a near-defenseless target for the Chimera. Mortar rounds exploded all around the Dreadnought. The shells were designed to incapacitate lightly armored infantry and were less than useless against Illiam's righteousness and thick ceramite and adamantium armor plates.

"For the Dark Gods!" A gaggle of fallen humans yelled and charged Illiam's enormous form with suicidal zeal.

Illiam smote them all with a single contemptuous swipe of his left arm's Powerfist. ***"There is no hope in defiance!"**

A pair of missiles raced past Illiam and struck the Chimera. One of the missiles simply bounced off the hull. The second struck behind the turret and tore a small gash in the armor. Illiam noted that the attack did no significant damage, but the untrained crew polluting the Chimera turned their attentions to the source of the attack. The ancient Space Marine doubted the small UNSC bunker could withstand the full attentions of an autocannon for long. Illiam willed himself to full speed. His advance was less of a charge and more of an avalanche of righteous wrath. An entire squad-sized formation of Heretic Soldiers was trampled under Illiam's mighty footfalls. The impact of Illiam's collision with the Chimera drowned out the surrounding war's sonata of death.

FOR EMPEROR AND IMPERIUM! Illiam roared as he tore a pair of massive holes into the side armor of the armored fighting vehicle. He activated the melta attached to his Seismic Hammer and fired into the exposed interior. In a picosecond, the crew and passengers of the Chimera were immolated by the intense heat.

"Sir, this is Miranda-I16. We've found a small stock of Heavy Weapons. Further orders?" the young SPARTAN reported over the radio.

Your orders are to ensure your survival. Mark your targets well and trust in the Machine Spirits of your wargear! They are as eager to slay the foes of mankind as you and your fellow Aspirants! Illiam bellowed in response.

"Copy that, sir. Gregory is getting a team together to watch the flanks. We've been trying to keep the little kids from freaking out," Miranda reported.

The Dreadnought grunted. ***"Excellent. Have you established contact with Command?"**

"No sir," a SPARTAN aspirant that Illiam had not heard before spoke up. "I've been trying to get through, butâ€|Chaosâ€|has some really strong jamming in the area."

"**State your identity, Aspirant," **Illiam stated quickly while reviewing the sensor data flowing into his sarcophagus.

"Vincent-I102, sir," the young man reported. He had ceased to be a child the moment Chaos had turned its dread attentions to Onyx.

"**Attempt a deeper communion with the Machine Spirit of the Communication Equipment,**" the Dreadnought ordered. "**Aspirant Gregory, what is the status of our flanks?"**

"I, I've made them about as secure as I can. Donald-I033 and Erica-I083 have welded some of the side doors and ventilation shafts closed. We've also moved some barricades in front of them," Gregory explained.

"**Well done,**" Illiam praised. "**You have all done exceptionally well.**"

There was no chance for the SPARTAN trainees to respond as a massive explosion rocked the area around Illiam. The shrapnel and fireball did not penetrate the ancient Dreadnought's armor, but it announced the next Chaos attack with authority. Nearly two platoons of infantry poured out of the woods. The heretical soldiers were supported by a pair of Chimeras and a corrupted Leman Russ Battle Tank.

A tide of multilaser fire erupted from the Chimeras and the cultists within fired ineffectual gouts of flame from their hull-mounted weapon. Illiam declared to himself that he would scour these heretics just as he scoured the previous attacks. The ancient Space Marine primed one of his Hunter-Killer Missiles and targeted the nearest Chimera. The rocket flew true and, as per the limited intelligence of its Machine Spirit, impacted on the top armor behind the turret. Illiam noted with grim satisfaction that the missile had struck the Heavy Flamer's promethium tanks. Cultists screamed as they burned alive in the twisted wreck of the Chimera.

Pain and warning klaxons wracked Illiam's body and sarcophagus. In his focus on the Chimera, the Leman Russ had managed to get a clear shot off with its lascannon. The strike was merely a glancing blow, but it tore into the ceramite plate.

"Illiam, sir! Do you copy?" Gregory's young voice rang in the vox receiver wired into Illiam's organic brain.

"**I endure,**" Illiam replied. He growled as the heretics supporting the two surviving war machines advanced. The heretical filth was charging with primed krak grenades. Illiam snorted in disgust. The small creatures might actually pose a threat armed as they were. He unleashed a torrent of fire from melta and heavy flamer. The Heretics were cleansed of their infinite sins by the holy flame of Illiam's weapons. The Dreadnought's sensors noted the detonating krak grenades impassively. Illiam's attentions were already elsewhere.

The explosions that followed reduced the survivors to bloody mush.

Illiam was pleased to hear the whine of incoming mortar fire. The Aspirants had broken out of their stupor and were engaging the enemy.

Mortar rounds, small arms fire, and rockets raced past the Dreadnought into the massed ranks of Chaos thralls. The Celestial Lion was surprised to witness four unguided rockets land convincing blows against the final Chimera transport. The impacts fouled the turret and rendered it inoperable. Most importantly, the rockets snapped the Infantry Fighting Vehicle's tracks. The Chimera was now little more than an immobilized strong point. Illiam snarled as he smashed aside a few wild cultists. Their weapons, mostly chainswords and odd flails, could barely even scratch the golden paint that declared to an uncaring universe that Illiam was a Celestial Lion.

Warning runes flashed in Illiam's consciousness. The Corrupted Leman Russ had fired its battle cannon. Illiam wheeled around to ensure his thicker front armor was facing the incoming Battle Cannon shell.

In an instant, Illiam's world was once again engulfed in fire.

Sol System

The Cobra-class Destroyer Vipera-Tribus was doomed. Covenant plasma torpedoes and the mosquito bites of Seraph fighters had inflicted horrific damage on the ancient vessel. Despite its damage, the Imperial vessel retained its pride.

Vipera-Tribus would sell its existence and the lives of its eight thousand, five-hundred, and nine crew dearly.

Fires poured from the ship's hull. The conflagration died the second it hit the terrible chill of the vacuum. Even as the ancient vessel burned and died, it continued to fulfil its duty and purpose. Her proud hull shuddered as the torpedoes continued to fire. The powerful projectiles possessed Machine Spirits, though limited, with the ability to track their targets through the Void. Vipera-Tribus' final volley smashed into a Covenant SDV-class Heavy Frigate. The xenos vessel had already been heavily damaged during the course of the apocalyptic battle and it could not withstand the staggered volley. The first two torpedoes were intercepted by pulse lasers, but this was a fatal mistake. The remaining torpedoes impacted on the Covenant vessel's port side before the Jiralhanae and Uggnoy crew could reorient the turrets. One torpedo struck the very forward hanger and the second struck the rear side hanger. The resulting explosion tore the ship into three parts.

Vipera-Tribus continued its mad charge through the debris field that was once its target. The ship's logic engines had determined that at the vessel's current speed that the SDV would be sufficiently diffused for the Imperial Destroyer to pass through. The surviving officers had selected their target well. A CCS-class battlecruiser would be a glorious final killâ€|

As Vipera-Tribus continued its sacrificial charge, the rest of Vipera Squadron advanced. The four remaining vessels prepared to launch a renewed torpedo assault. The Imperial Escorts had been separated from the main body of their battle group by a massive Covenant assault.

"Fire-containment crews and servitors are reporting that Cell Seven on Deck Thirty One is secured. Cells Eight through Ten are sealed. No further threat to our oxygen supplies," the Damage Control Officer of

Vipera-Primus reported.

"Torpedoes primed! Logic Engines have established targeting and guidance solutions," the Chief Gunnery officer reported.

Captain Ruse'i flexed his nearly-atrophied muscles as he sat upon his Command Throne. "Status of our Sister Ships?"

"All Vipera Squadron vessels, save _Vipera-Tribus_, report they are at readiness," Ruse'i's Executive Officer reported.

"Fire," the captain ordered at barely a whisper.

Vipera-Tribus was nearly thirty-nine thousand kilometers away from its squadron. The defiant vessel had received a great deal more damage during the course of its charge. The CCS-battlecruiser it had selected as its final offering to the altar of mankind's ascendancy continually poured pulse laser fire into the suicidal human vessel. _Vipera-Tribus_'s dedicated Tech Priest contingent had appealed to the ship's proud Machine Spirits. Their efforts had coaxed power to the forward Void Shields. The Void Shields permitted the Cobra Destroyer to continue its charge.

The scant moments earned through sweat, blood, and effort sealed the Covenant cruiser's fate. A plasma torpedo punched through the Imperial vessel's Void Shields and impacted near the starboard engine. The vast engine sputtered and died as the energy from the stellar-grade generator at the heart of the _Vipera-Tribus_ could not continue to power the ship. However, the momentum of the destroyer was too great. In a single swipe of the pendulum, the _Vipera-Tribus_ collided with the CCS-battlecruiser. Fires, plasma discharges, and debris erupted from hull breaches in both vessels. The two vessels rippled under the stress of the cataclysmic impact. However, the greatest damage was caused by the Warp Engine of _Vipera-Tribus_. Unlike the sacrifice of the _Dominus Astra_ amongst the rings of Circe at the Battle of Maccrage, the engine did not detonate. Instead, the Warp engine underwent a partial collapse. It was not a full detonation, but a truly massive amount of energy had still been released. Shields, both void and energy, were stripped away from a dozen vessels. Tens of thousands died as commanders on both sides of the apocalyptic naval battle lunged at the moment of weakness in their enemies.

Despite the heroics of Vipera Squadron and the myriad other human naval vessels, the Covenant was continuing to advance. Jiralhanae Shipmasters used the fear of the lash to drive their naval forces against Earth and Mars.

Earth's Orbital MAC platforms greeted the invaders with a symphony of rage.

Alpha Centauri Command Center

An explosion reverberated through the tunnels, but Inquisitor de Loreant showed no signs of even registering the quake. "Are the preparations complete?"

Captain Spann approached the Inquisitor. "Yes sir. The Techpriests and engineers have managed to reopen three side tunnels. I've seen the reports. We can't trust them to remain stable for long, but the

tunnels will suit our purposes."

"We must move quickly. The xenos have turned on each other, but our fellow humans are being threatened by the numbers of the abominations."

"Yes, Inquisitor," Spann responded. "The mining maglevs are operational. The Techpriests have managed to reactive them. We'll be able to use them to reach the combat zone in five minutes."

Jacques de Loreant drew his bolt pistol. "In seven minutes, I want that xenos blood to run like a river. For our brothers and sisters. For our _species_. For our God-Emperor and our Eternal Dominion over this and every galaxy!"

Captain Spann did not share the Inquisitor's zealotry. He was not the product of nearly ten thousand years of religious indoctrination. There was no loyalty to the 'Emperor', even if he had revealed himself at Mombasa. Spann did appreciate the loyalty to humanity as a species, however. The UNSC captain's entire life had been defined by the struggle to survive the Covenant.

'_The war will probably _be _my lifeâ€|I wonder if I'll even see the end,'_ Spann thought morbidly. It was a dark thought, but he had seen entire worlds put to the torch.

There were some images that would never leave a man. Images that waited just beyond the veil of sleep.

Inquisitor de Loreant watched as Spann boarded the monorail. The Inquisitor had limited prescience. The strands of Fate connecting the UNSC captain to Time and the Warp became blurred the moment the assault teams reached the battlefield.

In all likelihood, Spann would not survive the coming battle.

The silence of the monorail ride was only occasionally interrupted by the groaning of the overtaxed tunnel supports and the occasional explosion from further down the line. The groaning grew louder and part of the tunnel shifted and collapsed with a roar.

"Status!" de Loreant bellowed. The monorails eventually slid to a halt the electricity feeding the monorail bled away.

Spann coughed as he listened to reports. "Second squadâ€|it's gone. The tunnel collapsed on themâ€|"

"Such a useless death," the Inquisitor spat.

"C-Command, this is Fourth Squad. What is your status?" The young sergeant leading the squad called over the radio.

"Green, but we've lost Second Squad," Spann reported harshly. That was no way for men and women to die. "The Inquisitor and all our forces are heading to reinforce our comrades. Find a way to catch up."

"Yes sir," the sergeant responded. "We see a secondary tunnel. Advancing."

The Inquisitor exited the monorail. "Time is our enemy as much as the Covenant."

Spann was keenly aware that the Inquisitor was right. "Double time ladies!"

The UNSC troopers who had survived the cave in dashed through the tunnel. As they advanced, the unmistakable sound of combat grew louder. Xenos screeching, the shouts of dying men, and the crack of half-a-dozen unique weapons echoed in the tunnels. It took a moment for the UNSC soldiers to adjust to the change in lights.

"The hell are Skirmishers doing here?" A Sergeant who had miraculously survived The Fall of Reach barked. The sudden outburst was his undoing as a pair of Skirmishers turned their attention to the UNSC soldiers and tossed a pair of plasma grenades.

"Scatter!" Someone shouted from the knot of marines. One of the grenades failed to find purchase on the crumbling walls of the corridor. The second grenade attached itself to a private in Third Squad. The doomed private had enough presence of mind to shout for his fellow soldiers to move further way. His last act was to jump behind a rusted and abandoned forklift. A dull _thud_ announced the detonation of the grenades. The unfortunate soldier was reduced to a splattering of super-heated gas and chunks of offal.

His death went unnoticed.

The grenades slowed, but did not stop the human reinforcements. Inquisitor de Loreant's bolt pistol splattered one of the skirmishers and MA37 dropped the others. Fire from the Jackals was sporadic. The xenos were caught between the soldiers of the Astra Militarum holding the only entrance into the primary passageway system.

Captain Spann slid into cover as a pair of Spiker rounds flew over his head. He popped up from his position and laid down suppressing fire on a Skirmisher position. Unfortunately, the insane rune-inscribed aliens only roared their devotion to an alien and cruel god. The rushed his position before Spann could dive back into cover. He felt a tickle of heat on his neck, but thanks to his combat focus and a surge of unknown strength continued to fire. The first Skirmisher fell as a burst of fire punched a hole in its chest. Spann killed the second by blowing out the back of its head. The final Skirmisher was only wounded. Spann tried to growl as his MA37 clicked. It was dry. Suddenly, Spann realized his entire left side was sticky and very warm.

"Oh," wanted to say, but it only came out as a gurgle. The unknown vitality left his body and he collapsed into a heap. Unlike the earlier soldier, Spann's passing was marked by one of his fellow human warriors.

Jacques de Loreant had reached out his psyker abilities to allow Spann a moment of revenge. It was an oddly sentimental gesture from the brutal and distant man. The Inquisitor turned his attention away from his bout of sentimentality and obliterated a Jackal with a bolt round. The mass reactive slug slipped through one of the gaps in the Kig-Yar's Point Defense Gauntlet. The shell did not strike the alien, but the wall behind the creature. The 'miss' did not save the Jackal. It was torn to shreds as the explosion sent a wall of shrapnel into

the Covenant mercenary's back.

The Covenant's fire was steadily slackening.

"Press the attack! Squad Three, suppressive fire on the closest phalanx!" The Inquisitor ordered. Communication would have been impossible in this chapel of war. The universe seemingly molded this cavern perfectly to transmit the acoustics of the symphony that accompanied combat. De Loreant smiled as the chime-discharges of the Kig-Yar Needlers and the crack of the Jiralhanae supplied weapons faded into the background. In their place, only the comforting crack of UNSC autoguns or the familiar popping of lasguns remained.

Moments later, even the gunfire gave way to the groans of dying men and aliens.

"Tend to our wounded. Deal with the xenos quickly and try not to waste too much ammunition." Jacques de Loreant moved to where Captain Spann's corpse was rapidly cooling. The psyker prayed to his God-Emperor that the man's soul had not been claimed by the Great Enemy.

The powers were all in ascendancy. The Imperium and UNSC were backed into a corner, but the Sangheli rebellion had given mankind a reprieve. Information gleamed from the xenos Oracle Master had painted a most comforting picture. The Sangheli had split the Covenant almost in half. The Prophets still commanded a larger portion of the former Covenant, but the billions of mercenary Kig-yar were not the most reliable of soldiers.

And a single Sangheli was worth five Kig-Yar or Uggnoy.

A tremor in the Warp snapped de Loreant's spine into a ridged position. _'The Great Enemyâ€|'_

"Sir," a UNSC soldier called out. "Lordâ€|Inquisitor?"

"Speak, soldier," Jacques ordered tersely.

The soldier stood at perfect attention. If he had known the black depths Jacques de Loreant had plied to ensure Humanity's survival, the man would be cowering. A bit of psychic cues must have leaked out, because the man shrank back a little bit.

"Squad Four requests your expertiseâ€|"

"What have they found?" de Loreant asked. The marine shook his head, but could not speak. De Loreant's psychic abilities were responding to his emotions and the ravages in the Warp. "What. Have. They. Found?"

"Theyâ€|they can explain, sir," the soldier handed over a vox.

Inquisitor de Loreant activated the small device. "This is Inquisitor Jacques de Loreant. Describe what you have discovered in detail."

The sergeant took a nervous breath before he began, "Sir, I've never

seen anything like it. I-I think it could be Forerunner. The angles areâ€|off, but similar. I see a few symbolsâ€|"

"Guard that location!" The Inquisitor snapped. He had studied the UNSC's limited data on the Forerunners. Securing even a small amount of the archeotech would have a profound impact on the power of Mankind.

It took some time for Jacques to reach the squad's position. They were holding a large cavern of carved stone. The cavern was cut with clinical precision.

Jacques recognized the origin immediately. "I want a full sweep of this entire facility. Every nook, cranny, sealed passage, everything."

"Sir?" A marine asked nervously.

"Now! I gave an order. You will carry out that order or I will break you," Jacques threatened.

The Inquisitor watched the soldiers scatter from the chamber. Jacques had let some of his psychic might leak through in his anger. It was of little consequence, but the nagging concern of Chaos would not be silenced. The Dark Gods were very active in this region of space and every use of his psychic power was a risk.

'_Still,'_ Jacques thought. _'The opportunitiesâ€|'_ "Mankind will claim this place. It will bend its knee to our manifest destiny as all things must."

De Loreant ran a hand along the cool obsidian walls and grinned. If the Builders of this accursed place were absent, or damagedâ€|

The thought brought a thin smile to the usually taciturn man's lips.

'_ONI claims the Forerunners have declared us Reclaimers. Why should we be limited to simply reclaiming the Forerunners' legacy when there are so many other relics in our galaxy? The _Webway_ will welcome its new Psychic masters.'_

Forerunner Vessel

Master Chief was beginning to understand just how dependent he had become on Cortana. He felt blind and deaf without the constant intelligence the Smart AI had provided for John since the First Halo. Cortana had the Covenant networks bare before him. John had known the orders of Covenant soldiers before the soldiers themselves. Cortana had allowed him to turn the enemy's own technology against them. He would not have survived either Halo Campaign without Cortana.

He felt deafened without Cortana's assistance. Spartan-117 even missed her quips and banter.

'_I have lost strategic initiative without Cortana,'_ Master Chief admitted to himself.

Without the Smart AI's help, he was one step behind Truth. The Jiralhanae were able to coordinate their assaults with near impunity.

It wasn't just their assaults on Master Chief that they were allowed to carry out thanks to a secure computer network.

The Covenant Fleet was in full communication. John knew that other UNSC AIs were trying to batter their way into the Covenant BattleNet, but without having one of their own inside the systems the task was far more difficult.

'_The Brutes seem to be attacking on a schedule. That must mean Truth is micromanaging themâ€|'_

Chief could use that to his advantage. He didn't have the overwhelming computer skills of Cortana, but he could read a map. The basic translation software suite in his MJOLNIR armor allowed him to identify a chamber the Covenant had designated as a Reliquary. The SPARTAN would prey on the Hierarch's religious fervor and draw the Brutes into a battlefield where the Master Chief held all the advantages. The Covenant would never risk damaging their precious artifacts and religious totems.

John checked the charge on his plasma rifle and frowned. It was dangerously low and he had not found an opportunity to replace the weapon. Chief slipped from cover to cover in almost complete silence. At the other end of the massive corridor, a door slid open. A small pack of Jiralhanae and about a dozen Uggnoy emerged. The diminutive Grunts shifted nervously and routinely cast nervous glances back to their overseers.

"The Demon was sighted in this area! The Holy Prophet of Truth wants his head!"

'_Formation is loose. The Brutes will try to use the Grunts to flush me from cover so that they can engage. Looks like the Grunts are moving in units of three,'_ the Master Chief observed. He also noticed that the Jiralhanae had split their pack into two smaller 'fire teams' of roughly four Brutes each. The Captain was wearing the now-standard-issue armor of its species. However, the Brute still carried the banner Chief had seen Brutes carry on High Charity. Master Chief was hidden in the gloom of shadows and moved between the angular pillars and the organic-esque Covenant equipment. It was a simple exercise in stealth to avoid two of the Grunt 'fire teams'.

"Find him! We cannot fail the Hierarch!" The Captain raged as he failed his plasma cannon. The entire display was oddly childish.

Chief primed his final plasma grenade and threw it. One of the Brute 'fire teams' cried out a warning about the 'holy flare' and scattered. The grenade detonated and successfully killed one of the Brutes. Another Jiralhanae wasn't killed, but had severe burns on his right side. The pain managed to push through the fog of the xenos' constitution and religious fervor to slow it down. Master Chief picked up the Plasma Canon and eliminated the wounded Brute and two of the prone xenos. He ducked behind a supply station as the Brutes returned fire. The fire was well aimed. The goal for most of the Brutes was simply to pin the SPARTAN in place as one of the teams could engage him in close combat.

For all their animalistic fury, it was easy to forget that the

Jiralhanae were an accomplished, intelligent, and determined warrior race. The Jiralhanae had clawed their way back from nuclear annihilation. A weak race could not achieve that. A weak race could not have fought both the Sangheli and Humanity on such equal terms.

Chief's motion tracker alerted him to the direction and numbers of the enemy. The Brutes lacked the experience and guile of the Sangheli. They had not learned how to mask their maneuvers with 'chaff'. It allowed Chief to counter their attempts with accurate fire from the plasma cannon. He managed to kill a single Brute before Lady Luck decided to side with the Jiralhanae. A one-in-a-million spiker round struck the plasma canon and damaged a coolant line. The weapon immediately shut down. It was little more than a club now. Fortunately, a club was exactly what the Master Chief needed at that moment. The first Brute reached John and swung his bladed gun at the visor of Chief's MJOLNIR armor. The SPARTAN ducked under the swing and struck the Brute in the knee. An inhuman howl escaped the creature's lips as the joint buckled under the sheer power of John's strike. In a flash, Master Chief caught the dropped weapon and shot the alien point-blank in the head. He quickly slashed at the nearest Jiralhanae's strangely exposed stomach. The alien howled in agony as it began the process of bleeding to death. Master Chief used his Spiker to block a strike from a Mauler.

As the Brute's strike recoiled, John-117 took the opportunity to shoot the alien in the face. It died without a scream, and barely a gurgle.

The other Brutes were charging and Chief managed to drop a pair with fire from his Spiker and another recovered from a dead Jiralhanae. SPARTAN-117's fire forced the charge to lose momentum as the Covenant soldiers took cover.

Deep within the Forerunner vessel, the Prophet of Truth watched the battle with a growing sense of rage and worry. The Demon was humiliating the Jiralhanae under his command. Thus, he was being humiliated. The Hierarch calculated the size of the corridor where the battle was raging. The San'Shyuum grinned as he realized that it was just large enough.

"Chieftain, we cannot allow The Demon to defile the reliquary. Deploy a Type-30 Light Anti-Fortification Platform and remove that cancer from my ship."

The Chieftain acted quickly to carry out his Prophet's orders.

Master Chief received his first warning of the impending attack when the Brutes began falling back. It was moments like this where Cortana's information gathering capabilities were sorely missed.

It would have given him a few minutes warning before the Locust charged through the massive tram doors at the far side of the room. There was no way that Master Chief could dodge the massive plasma discharge from the Locust's weapon. He was, in a pair of words, completely screwed.

Until the moment he was saved by the tragedy of the naval aspect of the Battle of Earth.

The UNSC frigate _At Tiffany's_ completed a suicide run at Truth's ship. The human vessel was propelled solely by inertia. Two Imperial _Lunar-class_ Cruisers dropped a fraction of the massive Forerunner ship's shields with a barrage of Lance and Torpedo fire. Less than two hundred meters from the Forerunner vessel, _At Tiffany's_ detonated its fusion core. Multiple small hull breaches and shockwaves ravaged the section of the dreadnought. The vibrations threw the Locust off balance and its energy beam hit a weakened section of the hull. A hull breach was opened by the weapon and the void reached out for Master Chief.

Orbit of Earth, _Imperial Overlord-class Battle Cruiser Redemption of Yuliah_

The Battlecruiser roared forward into the heart of the Covenant formation. Its prow-mounted weapons battered were battering an _RCS-armored Cruiser_. UNSC frigates and destroyers dashed in and out of the battle, taking opportunistic shots at damaged or shieldless Covenant vessels. As the _Redemption of Yuliah_ watched the _RCS-armored Cruiser's_ engines sputter and die, the mighty vessel's logic engines detected an energy flare in the Forerunner Dreadnought. The captain of the vessel ordered both of his mighty twin-linked Lance batteries to fire on the enemy shield facet that had inexplicably weakened.

In the overcrowded and sweltering bowels of the _Redemption of Yuliah's_ Lance Turrets, menials and servitors strained to reorient the turrets to an optimal firing solution. The deep thrum of the enormous weapon drowned out the shouts and struggles of the crewmembers. Techpriests chanted and entreated the Machine Spirits to vent their rage at the Covenant. The lead engineseer informed the Lances that the Prophet of Truth was on board the targeted vessel.

The Hierarchy was one of the architects of the genocidal campaigns against the human race. The xenos filth was a defiler of the inheritance of Archeotech the Omnissiah had seeded the Milky Way for humanity's reclamation.

The Prophet of Truth's very existence was an affront to the Omnissiah.

The Lances unleashed their continent-immolating power and the first blast dropped a localized portion of the Dreadnought's shields. The second Lance struck true. A series of explosions tore a series of breaches in the Forerunner vessel's ancient hull. The ship's onboard AI network quickly sealed the breaches with the advanced Forerunner hard-light technology. The _Redemption of Yuliah_ had fired a full broadside, but the shields recovered almost instantaneously and prevented any further direct damage to the ship.

"Lord Captain!" One of the officers shouted. "I am detecting an UNSC IFF in the debris!"

"What?" The captain asked over the din of the vessel. The thrum of power coursing through the ship like blood in a vein, the shouts of the crew overseeing the battle, and the vibrations from the impacts of battle were almost overpowering all other sound. "Can we get a teleport lock established?"

"Negative, Lord Captain! There is far too much interference for a confirmed lock." Another explosion drowned out the rest of the officer's report. Less than two hundred miles away, a Covenant _CRS-cruiser_ detonated after being bisected by a barrage of plasma and cannon fire from a _Lunar-class cruiser. _

"May the Emperor guide whoever that man is to His Table," the Captain intoned.

Low Earth Orbit

The silence of the Apocalypse was unnerving. Master Chief thought as he gripped tightly to the Forerunner metal that served as his reentry heat shield. The SPARTAN kept his composure. He, academically, knew that the MJOLNIR and its shields were rated to survive some atmospheric traversal. The SPARTAN-II had never possessed the urge to test the theory. Alert klaxons blared in his helmet as the limited computers in his suit of MJOLNIR armor tried to warn the Master Chief just how fucked he truly was.

'_If it wasn't for this hunk of metal, I'd be fried,'_ John-117 realized. His gaze caught the sight of a Covenant Assault Carrier breaching Earth's atmosphere in spite of a direct hit by a _Marathon-class's_ MAC cannon. As he took in the image of Mankind's homeworld, he saw flashes of the end of days. There were several angry orange eyes opening across North Africa and even Europe. His systems classified them as nuclear and plasma detonations.

Suddenly, Chief's vision was exclusively flame. He had truly hit the atmosphere. The heat was almost too much. There was no warning as a detonation from _somewhere_ washed over him. It was the first sound the SPARTAN had heard in what felt like a lifetime.

Earth welcomed home one of her greatest protectors and John's world faded to black.

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Sorry this took so long to get posted. I was actually pissed at this chapter for a very long time due to an incredibly stupid mistake I made. It's been corrected and I'm pretty happy with the final product. Please leave reviews. Reviews are the Emperor's Currency!

End
file.